

JOACHIM'S DAUGHTER

HICKS



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JOACHIM'S DAUGHTER

A Story of the time of
Herod the Great

"KING OF THE JEWS"

By

WILLIAM C. HICKS



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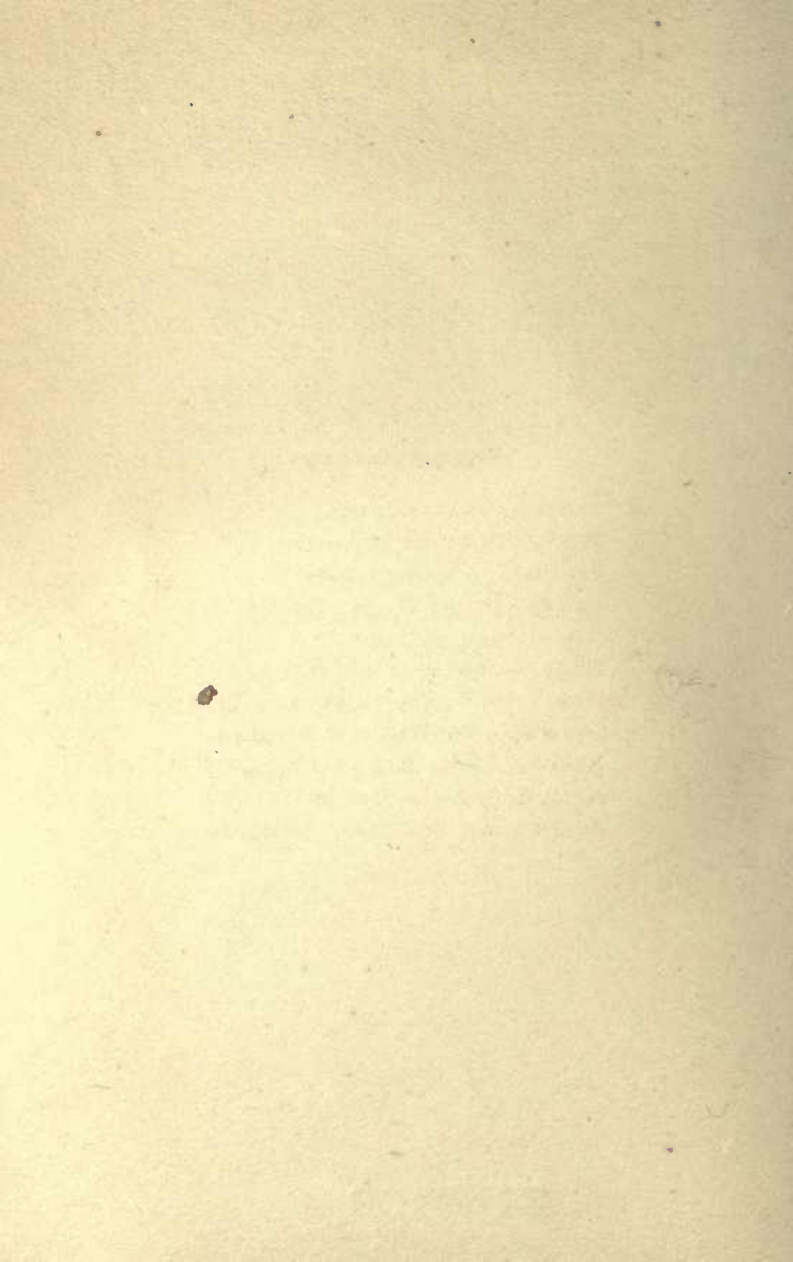
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Principal Characters

JOACHIM, Jewish Patriarch
JOSEPH, the Friend of Joachim
PANTHERA, a Roman Soldier
HABABLI HILLEL; Jewish Teacher
RABBI JUDAS, a Priest
SIMON GATZOR, Merchant of Hebron
HEROD THE GREAT, "King of the Jews"
SOLON HAI, the Wizard of Jerusalem
MELSACH, COSTA, Minions of Solon Hai
MARY, Daughter of Joachim
ALTA GATZOR, Daughter of Simon Gatzor



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Joachim's Daughter

CHAPTER I.

THE MAGI.

"In thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed. Amen, my child! This was the promise made of God unto our fathers—to which, serving him at all times, his people hope to come."

"Father dear, thine eyes are dim with looking; thine ears are dull from listening; thou hast waited long for the anointed."

"Truly hast thou spoken, daughter of Anna, yet we may not be weary. His promise is sure and steadfast—Child of my heart! Moreover, to give his people strong consolation, he made oath by himself, and he could swear by no greater—"That unto him every knee shall bow and every tongue confess!" "

An expression of exalted grandeur rested upon the countenance of the aged patriarch, who uttered these words.

The child-woman, reclining at his feet, raised herself from this posture and looked lovingly, tenderly and anxiously into the face of her venerable companion.

With fixed features and wistful eyes the man gazed toward the eastern horizon, as though he would realize,

out of the cloudless sky, the presence of the one anticipated; while the maid, just budding into womanhood, supported herself against his knee.

Beneath the rich, light robes that adorned her body could be traced the voluptuous, graceful lines of a well-moulded figure.

Daintiest feet imaginable, laced in crimson leather sandals, peeped from under the loose, purple, outer garment. Her exquisitely shaped dimpled hand toyed with a golden tassel suspended from an elaborately wrought girdle of the same material, which confined the folds of her elegant attire about the lithesome waist.

A silver circlet, of intricate design, held the auburn tresses back from an ideal forehead, permitting the glossy locks to fall in waves over the rounded shoulders. Save this slender, gleaming wire, no ornament adorned her hair.

The artful hand of the Grecian sculptor, in his palmiest days, could not have carved a more beautifully symmetrical neck than the one exposed to view beneath an upturned face of striking loveliness. Although an oval, there were strong lines that indicated a lofty character and noble aspirations; a loving, melting expression about the eyes, now with dilated pupils eclipsing the deep blue of the iris, voiced the intense sympathy that was a part of this maiden's nature. The aquiline nose, the dark, luminous eyes, delicately chisled mouth and the peculiar contour of the cheek and chin, proclaimed the maid a daughter of Israel, of the tribe of Judah.

The upturned eyes, distended nostrils and parted, rosy lips combined to give to the features of the beautiful creature an aspect of much interest and concern; and to heighten and deepen the glow coming from the countenance of this divinely lovely Israelitish maiden.

On the velvety green sward, fresh, and as yet, untarnished by the scorching heat of mid-summer, was spread an eastern rug of ample dimensions and curious workmanship, which afforded the two a resting place.

Before their vision stretched the valley of Escol, with its grape vines, its olive trees and other herbage green with life and freshness. At one side was the ancient Kirjath Arba—Hebron—at one time the home of king David.

Nigh where they were seated stood, also, the giant oak of the Seer, with its mighty branches, under which, the father of this peculiar and strange people, entertained angels. A spot overflowing with sacred memories in the land of ancient Israel.

Far distant to the west could be seen the mountains of Judea; and, close at hand, a clump of Terebinth trees, their evergreen foliage tinged with purple and red. Three oblong tents from which emerged persons, who appeared to be acting in the capacity of attendants, afforded life to the scene and completed the picture.

A bright, beautiful spring morning greeted these persons as the sun rose in welcome accord with the cloudless sky; sending its golden gleams trickling through the morning air; lending an entrancing touch to the magnificent prospect.

The land of promise which Moses beheld with longing eyes, as he gazed from Pisga's mountain! The wonderful land flowing with milk and honey!

The spot could be seen where was the cave of Machpelah—in the field owned by Ephron the Hittite, the son of Zohar, to whom was weighed and paid four hundred shekels of silver current money with the merchant—in order that afterwards those who should own and possess the land might have a place to bury their dead.

A portion of earth, by its tender associations made sacred in the history of Israel, where Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; Sarah, Rebecca and Leah were laid to rest.

It was day dawn, the sun not more than an hour high—a clear spring morning peculiar to the land of Judea.

Shielding his eyes with his hand, the man scanned the distance towards the east and south. A massive gold signet ring sparkled on one of his fingers. Everything about these personages bore testimony of wealth, refinement and culture.

There was a certain noblesse about the bearing and demeanor of the man, which could not fail to attract more than ordinary passing interest and attention. His venerable appearance was heightened by a luxurious growth of hair, which was scrupulously well kept, and a long white beard, especially noticeable, falling as it did, in graceful lines to the waist.

Beneath the loose, eastern gown could be observed a close fitting tunic, of fine twined linen, trimmed with purple and gold in curiously wrought figures. A turban covered his head, from which hung a frill of light material, shielding the neck. The feet were shod with strong, well fitting leather sandals, held to their places by thongs of the same material.

At the door of one of the tents stood another man, who was clothed in similar costume, and who had the appearance of being somewhat younger. This person seemed to be silently contemplating the watching ones, as if to anticipate their wants. He was evidently in authority over the camp and its equipment, as from time to time he directed, in a quiet manner, the movements and doings of the servants who made up the rest of the company.

The tents were pitched in a field in close proximity

to the road, that wound along among the hills toward the city of Jerusalem. To the east a short distance, three miles or less, lay the city of Hebron with its new wall, which Herod had recently finished by the compulsory labor of his countrymen.

"Joseph, come hither!"

The person standing at the door of the tent came forward promptly in obedience to the request made by the older man.

"Age hath not dimmed thy sight. Look toward the south. Behold, the sun hath already arisen. My soul yearns for their presence."

"Thy servant, Joachim, beloved of the Lord!"

Joseph made a low obeisance before the patriarch, then turned and looked in the direction indicated.

"What seest thou?" sharply enquired Joachim.

"The dust of travelers, not more than a Sabbath day's journey," quietly answered Joseph.

"Salute thy father with a kiss, thou precious gift from the Lord," murmured Joachim, addressing the maiden, as he bent fondly over to receive the caress.

"Thou may'st leave me daughter," he continued.

"Abide thou in thy tent until thy father summon thee."

The maid arose obediently and went toward the place indicated by her father.

Joseph looked after her, as did, also, his companion, until she disappeared within the opening of the white-walled tent and was hidden from their view.

"Thy daughter, Mary, is already a woman," observed Joseph, in a voice, as if the fact had entered his mind for the first time.

"Thou hast spoken my very thought. The tender mercy of the Lord be about her at all times."

"Amen! Amen!" fervently ejaculated Joseph in

response to the invocation, as they resumed, once more, their watching and waiting.

Two other men, who likewise were of mature age and priestly bearing, were now plainly visible, a short distance away, approaching on horseback. They were clothed in very light grayish woolen costumes. These robes commenced by forming a turban for the head, from thence falling in folds over the shoulders. A slit through the gown allowed freedom for the arms, which were sleeved with linen. The costumes were drawn about the waist by means of a belt or cord from underneath. Their feet were sandaled. Their limbs were covered with close fitting gray apparently of the same material as their outer garments. The animals, on which they were seated, were saddled with light leather girdles with pummels, from which hung strong leather stirrups and to which the bridle reins were loosely tied.

The horses were strong, lithe limbed, well broken, of the Arabian breed, kind in disposition and tractable; in color almost matching the robes of their masters, who were armed with short whips, with which they guided the movements of these faithful animals.

Emerging from a sharp bend of the road, in the rear of them, could be seen two camels, each loaded with large packs, followed by two servants, dressed in white tunics and turbans, who were running along, bare footed and bare limbed, after these ancient burden bearers of the east.

The horsemen had discovered the tents and were urging their animals into a sharp trot, which quickly brought them abreast of where the two men awaited their arrival. Dismounting they turned the animals out to feed on the luxuriant grass by the wayside, while

they advanced toward the place occupied by Joachim.

Raising their hands above their heads, they proceeded to prostrate themselves to the ground before the Jewish patriarch.

"My brethren!" he exclaimed.

"Beloved of the Lord!" they answered in one voice, raising their faces from the earth.

Joachim, with outstretch hands, hastened toward the prostrate men.

"Arise, my kinsmen. The Lord be with thee. Let his mercy be over all within thy gates!"

The men arose at once, each in turn embracing Joachim, saluting him with a kiss.

Joachim enquired as to whether they had partaken of the morning meal, and when assured that they had, he pointed to the large mat and invited the newcomers to be seated. To this invitation they promptly acquiesced and seated themselves so that each faced inward.

The servants, in the meantime, had arrived and, without waiting for orders, proceeded to select a place to pitch an equal number of tents at a convenient distance from the others. In a very short time the vicinity took on the appearance of a tented village.

Whatever was the nature of the business bringing these venerable men together, there was nothing in the way, apparently, to hinder or delay its transaction; and it looked very much as though there had been a preconcerted arrangement which had led to this assembling.

There could not have been a fairer or clearer day had it been ordered or made on purpose. The pearly blue covering of heaven; the green sward of mother earth, with its fresh scent arising from

the morning dew ; the murmuring ripple of brooklets, as they trickled down their way toward the Dead Sea ; the musical warble of myriads of sweet tongued songsters, letting their melodies swell with cheerful pipe as the morning ushered in the day—all nature, seemed to have conspired to do her best and utmost to assist in making harmony for this meeting.

A number of papyrus rolls were produced and spread on the mat in the vacant center space. On these was written in Greek, Hebrew and other languages of the time, the subject matter which was to engage the attention of these scholars.

Animation and interest were displayed on the countenances of these men as they consulted, compared and examined, in a most circumspect manner, the records before them. From time to time minutes and copious notes, of the results of their investigations, were made and entered on the margins of the rolls or on tablets prepared for the purpose.

Capably and quietly, as though they were mere moving automatons, the Arab servants, having secured the animals and provided for their necessities and comforts, proceeded to erect a canopy over the place where the persons, about whom the interest is centering, were seated.

Four upright poles were placed in the ground at short distances from the corners of the rug, the two on the west side reaching somewhat higher than those on the east. Horizontal poles, running north and south, were fastened to these uprights near their tops and sheets of cotton were stretched over them. This simple arrangement served admirably in protecting the visitors and their host from the increasing heat. As soon as this kindly service was completed the servants with-

drew, betaking themselves to the shelter of their own tents.

The men under the canopy removed their turbans, exposing sunburned skins of a nut-brown color, there was no hint of the ebony or shining black of the negro, but that swarthy, berry-stained tinge of the Malay or Hindoo. That they were ripe in years was apparent to even the most casual observer. Each head was silvery white and their flowing beards were tinged with gray. Venerable features, imposing deportment and grave, earnest conversation all bore testimony to the evident fact that age and experience had been attained.

Their dark, thoughtful eyes were constantly bent on the rolls before them, intently scanning the characters thereon. As they conversed together, the stern and harder lines, which marked their fine faces, gradually softened and blended into expressions of benevolence, brotherly kindness and beneficence, which rarely can be counterfeited by the hypocrite or knave, and are only to be attained with certainty where the heart is right and the soul is true.

CHAPTER II.

THE SPY.

During the time, in which these scenes are laid, a wide spread belief prevailed, not only among the Hebrews, but in all the countries of western Asia, setting forth that a mighty prince would soon come who would deliver the people from the exactions of that mistress of the world—the Roman Republic. The rich and the poor; the strong and the weak; the freeman and the bondman; the cultured and the unlearned shared in this accredited opinion to such an extent that a general state of unrest and feverish excitement had been created.

Through this ever growing unquietness actual outbreaks had occurred in the western Asiatic provinces; and, although such disturbances were speedily crushed and the leaders slain, their theories and prophecies were listened to and hailed with avidity as, from time to time, they were proclaimed by others.

Augustus and the Roman Senate governed the Roman dependencies and the temple of Janus had been closed for some time. The great empire had no wars upon its hands—the world, in theory, was at peace. So long as there was no open rebellion or sedition, the Emperor paid but little attention to these rumors of a deliverer; in fact, the belief was rather encouraged than otherwise as it afforded the people occupation.

While interested in the investigation and interpretation of the prophecies contained in their sacred writings, they were not apt to be engaged in other and more dangerous pursuits. Moreover, astrologers and necromancers were seldom warriors—from such there was little to fear. The people must have something to afford them instruction and amusement.

Rome had, long ago, discovered that nothing allowed the chains to bind so lightly as encouragement of an indulgence in religious superstition. This prediction, of the advent of a mighty prince, was included under the head of superstitions and so long as the wise men and soothsayers, of the time, went no further than to make unfulfilled prophecies they were tolerated and unmolested.

The ambition of Augustus was satisfied to govern well the territory already acquired. Although introducing this spirit of toleration, as well as judicious, moderation and wisdom, into the councils of these people and nations of diverse aspirations, he afforded his subjects, to say the least, a doubtful security in the pursuit of their own pleasures, pastimes and convictions.

From the foundation of the world, an uninterrupted series of rumors, more or less vague and curious, had prepared these Asiatic tribes, many of whom were descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, for the coming of a king and conqueror. It was a sort of universal proposition to Jew and Greek, to the bond and the free, and, in fact, had invaded all parts of the great Empire, both east and west. In Judea the growth of this sentiment had attained such proportions as to exclude nearly all other considerations in the religious system of this devoted and exclusive people. The ancient oracles, predicting the advent of the Messiah,

were consulted and sought after with the intensity of desperation born of this hope and expectation.

It was he who would deliver them from Roman bondage; through him they would become the head of all nations; his might and power would overcome all opposition. On the throne of his father, David, he would order and establish his own kingdom, and all kingdoms should serve and obey him. He it would be who should make of his enemies his footstool, he would reign under the whole heavens, and of his government there should be no end. He would be the stone, cut out without hands, that would smite the image of Nebuchadnezzar on its iron-clay feet, and break them to pieces—so that all the iron, the brass, the silver or the gold in any way left of the Babylonian, Medo-Persian, Greek or Roman empires would be crushed and destroyed.

A time of trouble was portrayed, before this could be consummated, after which would be ushered in the reign of peace. From Jerusalem, the city of the great king, the law would issue and govern all the nations, tongues and peoples of the earth.

The Mazdean prophecies of Persia had also penetrated Palestine, and the name of Zoroaster had become, in many places, as familiar as that of Moses. During the captivity the people had become more or less familiar with the writings of this sage and seer.

The last things, and the end of the world, were relegated to the close of a long period of time, when a new Saoshyant is to be born, and a new, incorruptable world to begin. Ormuzd should summon together, for a final, decisive struggle, all the powers, in order to break forever the strength of evil. By his mighty aid the faithful should become victorious over all their

enemies. This would be the last appeal of Ormuzd to mankind. Then should the sun shine forth in the refulgence of its glory, and no evil power ever again disturb the peaceful fellowship, of the faithful, of Ormuzd and his angels.

An intoxication, of divine delirium was produced by, this religious exaltation, which led the people to hope against hope and which blinded them somewhat in their otherwise skillful methods of promoting traffic and fortunes. These sublime visions and sacred writings had for them a charm that nothing could set aside or divert.

Augustus had found it convenient to maintain a semblance of friendship for Herod, the Idumean tyrant, whom Antony had caused to be recognized by the Roman Senate as "The King of the Jews." His very race was hateful to this people. He belonged to a country, and an age, in which human life was of no particular value; and a people among whom death was given and accepted with almost perfect indifference. His cruel power over human life was never spared by this monster; the dearest ties of kindred were never allowed to interfere with his bloodthirsty purposes. There were absolutely no exemptions.

For over thirty years this scourge had wrung from a suffering people the substance of their productions—by dreadful exactions and enormous taxes. This treasure, drawn through his tax-gatherers, he used, as a profligate, to pension poets at Rome; for the distribution of prizes at the Olympian games; and to reward and endow his cruel emissaries who performed his bidding and obeyed his commands; at the same time he lost no opportunity, or excuse, to bring into

contempt the institutions held dear by this unfortunate nation.

The Sanhedrin was outraged and set at defiance; the high priesthood was degraded; the laws of the nation were despised; fear and terror held sway over those who maintained a semblance of respect for the ancient worship of the fathers. The only relief afforded this tryant cursed people was the faraway protection accorded them by Augustus and the Senate.

Herod, as if to add insult to injury, had embellished the temple and caused it to be rebuilt where war, age or decay had placed their mar upon the edifice. In its holy offices were placed creatures of his own making, to minister the rites and ceremonies of the people he represented.

A system of espionage was practiced upon the rich and opulent so quietly, silently, yet with such unerring certainty, that no movement which would or might interfere with his designs could be begun, which was not invariably crushed in its incipency; or, if permitted to gain any headway it was only for the purpose of involving a larger number, that they might fall a prey to his vengeance and avarice.

The prosperous had ever before them the dread object lesson of death and confiscation.

It was the rendezvous of the wise men; a meeting of the Magi—the prophets of the time. The tablets, skins, parchments and rolls in their possession were covered with written characters familiar to these sages.

The times, and dividing of time, were measured, adjusted, compared and arranged to accommodate the

interpretations placed upon the prophecies concerning them. These earnest, studious men, engaged and interested in this, to them, pursuit of timely knowledge and wisdom, were oblivious to their surroundings and to all occurrences beyond their near vicinity.

A ringing certainty permeated their inquiries and investigations, into the subject matter pertaining to the appearance of this great deliverer, which would not allow any question bordering on the realm of doubt. The testimony in their possession showed the time to be at hand. The kingdom was nigh—the consummation of the age, and the ushering in of a new dispensation was assured.

About the eyes of Joachim a supernatural brightness was noticeable, and his venerable face shone with the light of hope within his heart, as he expressed himself:

“Of the seed of David shall he be raised up who shall rule the people in righteousness. Behold the man whose name is *The Branch*. A king shall reign and prosper, and shall execute justice and judgment in the earth. Judah shall be saved and Israel shall dwell safely.”

As to the event itself, and its close proximity, there was a unanimity of opinion, but they disagreed as to the manner of its accomplishment.

One ventured that the prince would burst upon an astonished world; a warrior accompanied by an invincible army of horse and foot, armed and equipped for the fray, incontestable in power and unconquerable in his march of conquest.

Another believed that this personage would descend from among the clouds, surrounded by a host of mighty angels, with banners and music; that the sound of his voice would waken the dead; that the faithful would

meet the deliverer and accompany him, sharing in the glory of victory over death, hades and gehenna.

And yet another opinion received much consideration and thought. A child shall be born, who shall be a light to lighten every man that cometh into the world. He it shall be who shall save and exalt the people of Israel and be the hope of the world.

Herod was charged with establishing within the sacred precincts of the Holy of Holies, the abomination that maketh desolate. The sum of all sacrilegious villainy had been performed in the profanation of the sanctuary at Jerusalem, and the time must be ripe for the destruction of such wickedness.

"Surely the Lord would no longer withhold his hand."

This conference lasted all the morning, and the sun was nearing the meridian, when a solitary horseman might have been seen approaching, who came from the south by way of the wilderness.

On coming in view of the place of the meeting, he drew rein and quickly dismounted. Leading the horse to a shady place, where the rocks completely hid the animal, the new arrival secured his beast out of sight and hearing of the persons on the other side of the roadway. Casting his outer garment on the ground near by, he drew his girdle closer about his waist and immediately proceeded to move out toward the road leading to the encampment.

At his left side, thrust into his girdle, was a peculiarly formed instrument, shaped more like a cleaver than a sword. Placing his hand on the hilt of this ugly and formidable weapon, he carefully wormed his way along, with cat-like stealth and caution toward the canopy.

A fierce, greedy, covetuous glitter sparkled with snake-like glint from his eyes—while a malignant, sardonic expression overspread his swarthy, black features—producing an unmistakable impression as to the evil character of this man. He was clothed in a close fitting, greenish colored tunic, which blended with the surrounding verdure; without his movements it would have been difficult to discover his presence even at a short distance.

Swiftly, but nevertheless carefully, he made his way in the direction of the cotton canopy, from where the voices of the occupants distinctly reached him as he occasionally paused to reconnoiter, in evident concern lest the servants discovered his approach.

During one of these halts, while protected by the shelter of a clump of shrubbery, the curtain door of one of the tents was raised and, for a moment, the beautiful face and form of the damsel, called Mary, was exposed to view.

Instantly the gaze of the intruder was fastened upon this vision of angelic perfection. The hot breath of passion seethed through his distended nostrils; his bosom heaved—his feet fairly rooted themselves into the earth as he craned his body forward to drink in the voluptuous beauty of the maiden, whose wavy tresses were falling gracefully over her shoulders of alabaster whiteness; and whose face was radiant with womanly comeliness and unaffected modesty.

For only a short time she stood at the door of the tent looking toward the place where her father was engaged, then she disappeared within, unconscious of any threatening danger, either to herself or those she loved.

"How beautiful!" exclaimed the man in a hissing undertone, as if surprised and overcome with wonder.

A swift run brought him so close to the back of the shelter, where the Magi consulted together, that he could have touched the curtain with his hand had he so minded. Quietly drawing the weapon from his girdle, he noiselessly slit a small hole in the cotton partition, through which he peered at the persons who composed the party on the other side.

The spy paid but little attention to the conversation, now perfectly audible, he made, however, such observations as were by him deemed necessary and sufficient. After a searching glance in the direction of the tents, where the servants seemed to be sleeping, he withdrew as silently as he had approached. Gathering his discarded garment from the ground he mounted his horse and rode away in the direction from which he had come.

CHAPTER III.

THE WIZARD OF JERUSALEM.

When a safe distance separated him from the scene, just described, the solitary horseman urged his beast into a brisk canter. This pace soon carried him beyond danger of discovery, and brought him to a path, winding among huge rocks. He drew rein and guided the horse into the narrow, devious way. The rugged character of the path compelled him to advance slowly and with care until, at last, he was forced to dismount.

After moving for some distance in this manner, indication, of the presence of others in the vicinity, was given by the neigh of a horse. Turning at the base of a rocky eminence, flanking a level acre or more of ground, these others were revealed—three men standing near a tent which had been erected in the shelter of the rocks, while their horses grazed within this natural enclosure.

They wore costumes similar to that of the spy, who rapidly approached. This, and their actions, made it plain that they all belonged to the same party, and that the coming of the new arrival was expected.

Giving his animal liberty, that it might graze with the other horses, the spy made his way directly toward where the men silently waited; one, the chief, standing somewhat in front of the other two. The newcomer singled out this man and saluted him in the eastern manner.

"Sheik," he murmured, "Solan Hai—behold thy servant!"

"Melsach—thy feet are swift. Hast thou accomplished the thing whereunto thou wast sent?" Solan Hai looked keenly into the immobile countenance of his messenger.

"Thy servant hath obeyed thy commands," answered Melsach, returning the gaze of his questioner.

"Tis well, thou child of the desert! Tell us, what sawest thou!"

"Four sheiks, in conference—gray bearded and wise visaged, six tents, horses and camels, to thy servant's mind, not more than eight people."

"Thou observed Joachim, of Jerusalem, the one of whom thou wast especially charged?"

"He it was who led the conference. Prated most about the 'deliverer'—and against Herod."

"Hah! The king forgets not a compliment of the kind. Knowest thou the very spot where he may be found?"

"Were it dark as Tophet, I could guide thee thither."

"Tis well, Melsach, Son of the East. Thou and thy companions may rest until I call thee."

Leaving the chieftain alone, the three other men betook themselves to the shade of the tent, which was pitched close to where the interview had taken place.

Solan Hai was of short stature and powerful build, the shoulders stooped in such manner as to give him the appearance of a hunchback; bowed, hollow chest; extraordinarily long arms and prodigiously large hands. His face was not so dark and swarthy as those of his companions, but more of a sallow color with thin, chisled features, heavy brows and a large beaked nose. The brow was knit and a sinister expression was over

the face of this creature, like a terrible pall. An abundant crop of brownish red hair helped to make him a grotesque object, of the *genus homo*. His uncouth visage portrayed the very essence of villiany; his huge body was supported on a pair of bowed limbs; feet of enormous dimensions were attached thereto in proportion to his hands. These abnormal appendages were encased in rough fitting sandals laced over close drawn leggings.

There could be no mistake—the mark of Cain had been born with this monster. Commiseration and pity were as far removed from his nature as the east is separated from the west. There was in his vocabulary no word that did not reverberate with supreme human selfishness. His herculean build and muscular strength, combined with his cunning craft and a certain deceitfulness, gave him power over those attached to his fortunes, men reckless to every danger, whom he controlled and governed with an iron hand.

Notwithstanding his hugh, uncouth and apparently, deformed body, there was a tiger like activity about his movements that made him a terrible and dangerous antagonist. He was armed with the same kind of a weapon as his companion, Melsach, except that the instrument was much heavier and more formidable in appearance.

Seating himself on a convenient rock, the chief fell into meditation, and, while forming plans of operation, he chuckled to himself as though the matter in hand afforded him a vast amount of satisfaction.

“The friend of Herod must be the enemy of the rest of mankind—ha! ha! ha! If Joachim escapes, my beautiful head is in danger—he’ll not, No! No! The order is that he is not to see Jerusalem—never again,

no never." He clinched his huge hands and shrugged his broad shoulders.

"The belongings in his possession are to be ours, and five hundred shekels of gold as a gift. Ah! the gift shall be mine!" His lip dropped and his face protruded forward as a look of fiendish anticipation shot across his diabolical features.

"Must not molest the Persian wizards. Augh! As if a life or two could make any manner of difference. Forsooth! They must be allowed a safe conduct. Herod is a great master—so let it be!" Arising he shambling over to where the others were engaged.

One of them was occupied in preparing a meal, while the other two had a skin spread between them and were indulging in the ancient pastime of shaking dice for pieces of silver.

"Men," said the ruffian, interrupting the game, "we must watch the road until the Persian sheiks return and pass by this way. This way they came and this way they will return. As soon as they are safe on the way we shall overtake the tents of Joachim. See to it, he finds a funeral at Hebron. It is fitting his body be laid in the sepulchre of his fathers. Our dear kinsman is Joachim. He is well stricken in years. The demons are waiting to carry his soul to Abraham's bosom. I have said!"

"So be it!" responded, in chorus, the three who had listened to this harangue.

The two gamblers resumed their play as if the taking of life was a small matter quickly disposed of, while their companion resumed the preparation of the meal.

Melsach kept to himself the knowledge of the damsel, who was in the company of the prophets. Although

he was interested in the game, still his mind wandered to the beautiful vision he had beheld on that day. To which party she belonged whether the Persian or Hebrew, he had no means of determining. If to the one which might be expected to pass this way, within a day or two, at the farthest, it was a grave question, with even him, as to any interference with the safe conduct afforded them by the sheik.

"Thou hast won, son of a dog!"

"True, thou art fairer than the average, else thou would'st have cheated. I was thinking," answered the absent minded Melsach.

"Knives indulge not with profit in such pastime. By the king of the Jews, art thou turned sage! Hast the smell of the prophets made thee expect the great deliverer! If thou art tired, let us quit, luck is with thee at every turn."

The meal at this juncture was announced as being in readiness and waiting. The men gathered around the repast of baked, crushed cereals, which was accompanied with wine from a leather bottle, from which each drank in turn. The repast was dispatched in silence and without comment.

Whatever designs Melsach had, if any, affecting the damsel called Mary, were covered up and kept within his own breast.

There was a short consultation among the men.

Melsach entered into the plans of the sheik with alacrity. He was the first of the four to take up the duty of sentinel, and, from a commanding position, watched the road leading south from the camp of the prophets toward the wilderness. Here he waited patiently, and carefully noted everything which occurred during the

day until relieved by one of his companions late in the afternoon.

However and from wherever these personages had received their information, they were conversant with the fact that these wise men were to meet. Within a day, or at most two days, they would separate, the men from the East returning to their homes in Arabia, Babylon or Persia. It mattered little as to their final destination, or the country from whence they came.

The Partheans and the Medians were the enemies of Rome. To the bandits, all persons from the east were Persians, as all from the west were Romans. From some higher quarter they had evidently been ordered to give these eastern personages a safe conduct toward Arabia, to which order there was a compelling power demanding obedience.

Melsach, himself, was not quite certain that it would be prudent to interfere with these travelers if the woman should be in their company. But he had determined if possible to assure himself of this fact, hence his willingness to assume and perform the tiresome duty of sentinel. Interest, in this matter, was consuming him, nothing must pass without his notice. What he might do should she pass by this way was not defined—but, that he would do something which would effect the welfare of Mary, admitted of no manner of doubt.

As the sun was setting behind the hills his companion joined him, the one of the dice game. He imparted the information to Melsach, that, by order of Solan Hai, it would be necessary to take up a station near the public way, so there could be no possibility of these persons passing through the night without the information reaching the chieftain. The two men walked along

in company for a short distance toward the new watching place before Melsach accepted his relief.

"Thou hast always been my friend," spoke Melsach, abruptly addressing his companion.

"Speakest thou with doubt, Melsach? Were we not raised by the same Idumean mother?"

"Truly, but—" hesitatingly, "dost thou not fear Solan Hai, who communes with the dead and hath a familiar spirit?"

The two stopped in their journey, faced each other and, of a verity, a look of consternation and fear overspread the features of the man addressed by Melsach, as his mind was refreshed as to the supposed attributes and powers of Solan Hai, the wizard.

"Hist!" whispered the bandit, as he looked around expecting to behold the form of his chieftain, whose dread presence held a spell over the lives of these ignorant, dark minded men.

"Hist! The very winds obey him. The prince of the power of the air will carry him our every word!"

To add solemnity, weird and startling, to this admonition the gentle wind at evening twilight sighed among the rocks, whispering to the superstitious, untutored mind a warning of the dire consequences certain to follow the first intimation of disloyalty.

An awed silence lay for a moment between the two, then Melsach recovered from his momentary dread and returned to the subject uppermost in his thoughts.

"My brother, if there be a woman with the company as they pass by, withhold the information except to the son of thy mother. This is a small favor between us."

"Ah, my brother, we may not do such a thing. Surely the wizard will divine the whole matter, and know of a certainty as to all the persons."

"Thou fool!" cried Melsach, impatiently. "If so, why should he send us to watch? Could he not do some of his divining without the trouble of watching? Bah!" and he spat out to show his contempt. "Thou must do it, my share of Joachim's belongings shall be thine; they say he carries rich treasure with him always." This appeal overcame the man's superstition, aroused his avaricious cupidity and sealed the arrangement.

"I'll do as thou hast suggested," he said slowly, "but—"

"But, nothing!" hastily interrupted Melsach. "Consequences shall rest on my head, shall be laid at my door, thou shalt be exonerated in all things and rewarded. Lay thy hand on thy brother's thigh and swear thou wilt be true to me, thy friend, in this thing."

The two men placed their knees together, crossed their arms and placed their hands on each other's thighs.

"Swear!" exclaimed Melsach.

"I swear," answered the man compelled by the force of Melsach's energy, "ever to be true to the son of our mother, Eloheim protect and keep me true to this vow."

"Amen! Eloheim guard thee, my brother," responded Melsach.

This queer mixture of superstition and unconsummated devilry satisfied Melsach. Leaving his brother he returned with all speed to the camp on the green sward within the hills.

Solan Hai, the wizard, was still awake when Melsach drew near, while the other member of this band lay stretched on the ground, snoring in ignorance and

oblivion of every thing that might be occurring about him.

The pale moonlight only served to deepen the shadows that reached their grotesque lengths across the grass. The uncanny appearance of the place caused Melsach to quicken his pace until he came in sight of his sheik, who was walking to and fro before the tent muttering something to himself. The bandit could not resist the temptation to linger in the shadow and listen to the soliloquy of his master.

"Listen to the sound of the wretch's sleep!" and he paused to gaze on the prostrate slumberer. "Dost thy soul wander midst the shades of hades, or in the realms of the blessed. The wizard knows neither fear nor love. I hate even these slaves, who, dog like, fondle the hand which strikes. Still there is something about this mission, something about this gray bearded Joachim, that makes my knees quake and my heart sick as it presses on my soul."

"I was in fever. Thirst and the pains of gehenna racked my deformed body. Thy hands, of them all, oh, Joachim, ministered to my comfort. All! All! Curse them; laughed, jeered, mocked at my calamity. Thou alone turned in unto me. Thou alone gave me succor and comfort. Herod wills thy death. Irony of fate, the wizard, Solan Hai, must be thy executioner. The one thou nursed back, back from hell; the reptile thou didst warm into life must bite thee. The snake thou didst take within the warmth of thy breast must fasten its fangs into thy vitals. Bah! It is but its nature! The sum and substance of all villany is to betray and strike a benefactor."

CHAPTER IV.

A PERFECT MAN.

"Thou here, Melsach, thou dog's son?" exclaimed the wizard fiercely.

"Thy servant, oh sheik!" answered Melsach, as he prostrated himself before the brute rendered insane by anger, because of having been discovered in a moment of weakness. "Be not angry with thy friend. He who hath always been ready to serve and obey thee," pleaded the cringing wretch, as he ventured to look up into the face of the furious chief frowning over him.

"Arise," commanded the wizard. Grasping Melsach by the wrist he fairly whirled him to his feet, swinging him around so that the moonbeams shone directly on the pallid features of the thoroughly terrified eavesdropper who had brought on his own head the wrath of offended dignity.

Solan Hai knew that his minion had been listening,—true to his nature, playing the spy. The wizard could not be deceived. This show of fierceness was by no means assumed, it was real. He gazed into the face of Melsach, with a murderous glitter in his eyes, as if he would penetrate the very soul of the man.

"Tell me, Melsach," he demanded with terrible earnestness, "the secrets of thy soul. Keep not back one jot nor tittle."

Poor Melsach was fully persuaded that the wizard knew all, everything, of his plans pertaining to the

damsel; and in his abject fear, was about to blurt out the whole matter, as to his discovery at the camp of the prophets. Before he had recovered enough to do this, however, the wizard continued:

"Tell me, thou didst hear me speak of Joachim?"

"Tis true. I could not forebear without wads to stop my ears," Melsach answered with a return of his reckless indifference.

"Hark thee, Melsach, friend of Solan Hai." A marked change came over the demeanor of the superior with an unwonted kindliness in the tone of voice strange to the ears of the slave. "Hitherto, thou hast been my companion. Henceforth, thou shalt be my friend. Solan Hai hath never prayed for favors from any living man. Dost thou understand, Melsach?" and the grasp in which the chief had held his confederate was loosened, though he still continued to gaze into the face of the man.

"Thy servant would be thy servant only," promptly answered the man, pleased with the turn things had taken.

"Thou wilt then grant my request more readily. The wishes and commands of Herod must be obeyed. Joachim must die. Thou wast a bandit condemned to the cross. The night before the time set for thy execution, liberty was bestowed upon thee. A slave, whose only fault lay in his resemblance to thee, was hung between earth and heaven in thy stead. Thou hast not forgotten?"

"Could I ever forget, Oh, my master!" and Melsach shivered even in the balmy air of the mild night.

"This is the first time, for fifteen years, and more, that ever the matter hath been referred to by thy chieftain."

"True, my benefactor."

"Thou would'st cancel the obligation?"

"If thy slave could be so fortunate."

"Harken, son of my choice! Thou must act in my stead, in my place. Art thou listening?"

Melsach bowed low to conceal the satisfaction that might be betrayed, should Solan Hai see his face.

"Each particular word is treasured in my soul," he said suavely. "To do thy worst bidding shall be thy servant's greatest pleasure."

Solan Hai turned abruptly away. With quick strides he measured the distance to the outskirts of the little camp. Returning, he paused before Melsach and began speaking, half to the waiting man and half to his own perturbed self.

"I cannot, no! no! I cannot face that mighty man. Oh! Joachim, son of the morning to my soul, thy fingers were so cool; thy presence so kindly and compassionate; thy face the only thing on earth that ever spoke peace to my soul, no! no! no!" And he placed his hands before his face as if he would shut from his vision some horrid scene.

"Melsach! Thou shalt represent me. I cannot, I cannot, I will not do this thing."

It began to dawn upon the mind of Melsach that he was being suddenly advanced into the favor and good graces of Solan Hai. His natural discretion was brought into requisition and he coolly waited for the further development of the matter which so strangely agitated this remarkable person.

After standing for a short time with bowed head Solan looked up and, turning again to Melsach, hastily made known his wishes.

"Thou wilt take charge of this mission. When the Magi have passed, take thy brother and this sluggard,"

pointing to the prostrate man, "and attack Joachim's camp. There are two servants beside the priest. Thou wilt have but little trouble in securing the plunder, enough to satisfy thy companions. Thy friend shall reward thee with his own hand. When thou comest into the tent of the patriarch, or if thou mayst fall upon him by the way, then shalt thou seek cause against his life and smite him unto death."

"The plunder secured, why not let him escape?" questioned Melsach, grown bold as he listened to the unfolding of Solan's plans.

"Herod wills it otherwise," was the moody reply. "He is already—dead."

"His fault, Oh, Sheik?"

"He is of the house and lineage of David, who was the son of Abraham, who was the friend of God. He is the owner of large warehouses at Jerusalem, Jerico and Damascus filled with the richest merchandise of the east. This graybeard hath been a thrifty trader. Herod cannot live and brook such a combination." The scorn in the speaker's eyes blended well with the sarcastic tone of his voice as he enumerated the reasons for which Herod deemed it meet that Joachim should die.

"If he be so rich and the Jews learn of his death, will they not set up a clamor that will bring down inquiries and vengeance from Ceasar and the Roman Senate?" objected Melsach.

"We must care for that. Confiscation must follow death. Thou, and thy companions, shall witness to his sedition and rebellion, in the matter of this Deliverer, who is to be king instead of Herod; that he conferred and consorted with the enemies of Rome, the Parthians and others; that he used his vast possessions for such purposes, all of which acts and doings are well known,

so that Jerusalem shall cry out with acquisition against his name until it shall be a by-word and a hissing. Fail not thou in thy part. The rest leave to the wizard. Go, seek repose. Thou canst not tell what a day may bring forth."

Solan Hai had regained his composure and he evidently had said all that he cared to say for the present.

After a glance, into the unfathomable features of the sheik, Melsach again bowed himself to the ground and turned away. He could scarcely help disclosing to his chief the satisfaction afforded him by this arrangement. He chuckled to himself, in a very delirium of delight, as he grasped the good fortune which was working toward placing within his power the beautiful maiden, the memory of whom filled his mind with unholy passion and desire.

To have accomplished this, he would have plunged his poinard into the breast of the wizard with as little hesitancy as it might require to strike down an innocent and defenseless father, and rob him of the most precious jewel of all his vast possessions.

Pulling a skin from out the tent and rolling it into a pillow he was soon wrapped in uneasy slumber, while Solan Hai continued to walk and muse in the pale moonlight watches of the night. At last he too, fairly exhausted by the raging conflict troubling his soul, sought repose within the tent.

Long before the dawn Melsach had joined his brother, who had watched faithfully through the night. As yet the travelers had not passed on their return journey. An interval was improved, by Melsach, in skillfully arousing the energy and cupidity of his brother, but not a word was said as to the conference with the wizard the night before.

When Solan Hai awoke, in the morning, he made inquiries as to the whereabouts of his lieutenant. When he learned that Melsach had joined his brother in the watches, of the morning, he rubbed his hands with glee.

With the assistance of the remaining man, three of the horses were made ready for a journey. When this was finished Solan took two of the animals, and ordering his companion to bring the other, set out toward the highway. They moved slowly and with caution, the first glimmering of the new day was barely visible as they started on the journey. The chieftain was acting to lose the least time. To have the animals convenient would serve this purpose. As they approached the highway, one of the watchers was observed hastening toward them. It proved to be Melsach, who on seeing the horses, quickened his pace. Coming to a place where the more even pathway would permit him to mount safely he awaited his master.

"The sheiks have passed. They are now well out of sight," was his greeting as the two men came up to him.

"Tis well, my son, mount at once."

Melsach did so and secured the lead line of the other horse. The other man hesitated as he saw this movement of his companion.

"Mount and follow Melsach," ordered the leader briefly. The reason of, or for, the conduct of the wizard, in thus remaining behind was, of course, a mystery to the bandit. Yet, he obeyed the command forthwith, and asked no questions, made no complaints, nor did he presume to offer any suggestions, it was sufficient for him to know that before him lay the path which led to plunder and booty.

Solan Hai stood and gazed after the men as they

passed quickly out of sight. Muttering something to himself he turned back toward the place he had recently left, to wait the return of these heartless robbers bent on their murderous undertaking.

Reaching the place where his brother was waiting Melsach paused for a moment until the former was in the saddle, then he started, leading for the place he had visited on the day previous. Melsach had been careful to note with his own eyes the number of people in the company of those from the east. The maid was not among them. He concluded that she must be in some way related to Joachim. He remembered the locality where the tent was situated and his mind dwelt on the spot as though it held a magnetic charm.

There was no conversation among the men. Melsach was occupied with his own plans. He would seize the damsel, and fly with her to the mountains. Solan Hai would be satisfied, no doubt, if the prophet were dispatched. As soon as his prize was safely secured he did not anticipate any danger in returning to the service of Solan Hai.

The other two were silently wheting their avarice on the hope of much booty, Joachim was reputed to be a very rich person, and they had heard, that he always carried much wealth about with him.

Before the dawn Joachim's eastern visitors had struck their tents and departed as quietly as they had come. The two servants who cared for the belongings of the patriarch were also alert and busy with the preparations for their own return journey toward Jerusalem.

The camp of the Magi, made sacred and endeared to these men by association and brotherly communion, was a thing of the past. Joachim and the lovely Mary were seated in the only tent standing, prepared to undertake the journey that was before them. The two servants directed and assisted by Joseph were moving about packing the faithful camel and strapping the outfit together.

The gray of the dawn was slowly merging into day. A horseman approached Joseph, a splendid specimen of matured manhood. There was not the slightest trace of the Jew about him, either in figure, form, feature or movement. That he was not a native of Judea, or, in fact, any of the Jewish provinces was apparent. Although a man young in years there was a bearing about him which bespoke experience and confidence, a firmness in his every movement and gesture, that marked the traveler accustomed to the company and association of refined people. An open frankness beamed from his countenance which would have accorded him favor at once, and which went far to introduce him to the good opinion and graces of all with whom he came in contact.

About his carriage was the erectness which can be attained only through military training. The self-consciousness of true manhood was his, as well as, the bubbling buoyancy of youthful hope and aspiration; justifiable pride in good breeding and correct manners; profound respect for things esteemed sacred; patient appreciation of the rights of others, which always prints its seal on the truly noble man; consideration for the helpless and weak, with whom the checkered woof of life might bring him in contact; all these elements of forceful character were exemplified in an acquaintance with

this handsome being, who now appeared before Joseph, who could not resist the temptation to gaze earnestly at the new-comer.

The Jew knew him to be a stranger and an alien to the commonwealth of Israel, but could not help being impressed with the clear cut face; the broad, high forehead, above sparkling eyes of liquid blue; the nose, slightly of Roman shape, and lips, of form, that mothers love to taste in fond caress, and women hang upon as nectar from the gods. The hair, a glossy amber, fell in waves from his head, which was protected by a light helmet, such as those worn by the Roman cavalry. He looked like those whom Joseph had heard of, as inhabitants of the distant isles of the sea.

The face, clean shaven, showed the chin and jaws firm set as those of one who, gentle as the summer wind, yet knew his rights and, knowing, dared maintain them. A toga of the Roman fashion fell in graceful folds from his left shoulder leaving the sword arm bare. Beneath the toga a silk and gold embroidered tunic covered his body. Heavy gold bracelets encircled his wrists and on the left arm was held a brightly burnished shield, while from a metal belt hung the Roman short sword. In color the toga was royal purple bound in gleaming white; the hose were bright yellow, with sandals, of most exquisite workmanship, laced above the ankles. The broad shoulders, muscular arms and firm limbs gave to Joseph the impression of the most perfect man he had ever beheld.

CHAPTER V.

THE ABDUCTION.

"A soldier of the Roman legion, thy friend greeteth thee," and the new arrival bowed respectfully before Joseph.

"Thou art welcome. Whatsoever thy servant can command is at thy bidding. Our camp is broken. I fear thou wilt find but scant entertainment."

"I refreshed myself as we traveled. It was a hard journey from Jerusalem to this place and it was accomplished in a brief time. A little provender, good sir, for my horse would be acceptable." With this request the stranger placed his hand, in an affectionate caress, on the neck of his noble animal.

Joseph at once turned to the attendants and directed one of them as to the care of the beast. This kindly office performed his attention was once more given to the guest.

"Thou wilt partake of some food, I pray thee."

"Tell me first, am I speaking to Joachim, of Jerusalem, or canst thou tell me where he may be found?"

"Joachim, blessed of God, and friend of his race," said Joseph devoutly, "is well stricken in years. With his daughter he rests in yonder tent," pointing toward the place.

"I am intrusted with an important message to be delivered to his own hand," the stranger said. "It

concerns his personal safety; admits of no delay; and, requires his immediate attention."

There was something about the last remark that conveyed a command to Joseph; and which impelled him to repace at once to the tent, followed by the message bearer. Indicating that he would inform Joachim, Joseph left the man standing without, while he entered.

Shortly the tent door was drawn aside and the stranger bidden to enter. Obeying promptly, he stepped within, his feet sinking into the velvet of the costly rug placed before Joachim, who was seated immediately in front of the entrance. Mary remained near her father.

The new-comer removed his helmet and stood uncovered before the Jewish patriarch, whom he saluted with courtly grace and demeanor, giving a charm to the meeting that did not pass unnoticed by Joseph, who stood in such a position as to observe everything occurring during the interview.

The eyes of the visitor wandered from the face of the aged man before him, to the revelation of loveliness he beheld in the daughter. An expression of surprise and pleasure suffused the face of Joachim's guest. At the same time, the dark fringed eyelids of the maiden drooped in sudden, unexplainable confusion, and swiftly the rich blood mantled her cheek. For some reason, equally perplexing and obscure, Joseph could not restrain a sigh, as he was irresistably compelled to mentally note these uninterpreted manifestations on the part of these two young persons, who now saw each other for the first time.

"My son," were the first words that greeted the ears of the soldier as he returned his gaze to Joachim,

"thou art welcome. Joseph tells me thou hast a message for thy servant, Joachim."

"Father, venerable sir, I have been charged with this message, with instructions to deliver it to thee in person."

Placing his hand in his girdle he drew forth a papyrus, folded and scented, which he handed to Joachim.

To Mary the tones of this man's speech held a dreamy harmony, the like of which she had not heard before. She had not ventured to look again into the soldier's face, but with bowed head caught herself listening, intensely interested, to the melodious vibration of his musical utterance.

The patriarch received the epistle, opened it, and scrutinized its contents, then again looked up at the bearer, closely studying the face of his guest.

"Caius Panthera, was it also the name of thy father?" asked Joachim.

Again the clear voice broke the stillness of the beautiful morning.

"It gives me pleasure to say, I bear my father's name," said the young man, warmly.

"He fell at Actium?"

"Alas, yes," said Panthera, sadly, 'and the East lost its dream of empire."

"I was younger then," replied Joachim. "I knew thy father well. A brave, true man he was. Thou art the very image of his person."

"So my mother bears witness," and Panthera again bent his courtly head.

"Knowest thou the contents of this letter?" Joachim asked.

"Only as to its urgency, and that it was to be placed in thy hands with all dispatch."

"How long since thou left Jerusalem?"

"Half the night watches were past before thy servant started upon the journey."

"Thou hast made most excellent time. Joseph, let thine ear hearken to the message of our friend and handmaiden." Joseph started, as if from a dream. He, too, had been an attentive listener to the answers of the cultured and kindly mannered messenger, who now stepped aside as if to leave the tent.

"Hold, my son!" exclaimed Joachim, "it is meet thou shouldst know what spurred thee on thy journey."

"To serve the one, whose message I bore, was sufficient," said Panthera, proudly.

"Listen! Thou shalt be the judge." Thus importuned the messenger lingered within the tent. Joachim read:

"In the night, at Jerusalem:—

"Joachim, well beloved. Peace be unto thee: By the hand of Caius Panthera, a trusted friend, I send this warning.

"Thou hast been accused before my brother who seeks thy life. Jerusalem is stirred, through the baser sort, and by some mysterious influence a potent spell hath turned men's minds against thee. This, I am afraid, will work thee ill and end in death. Fly! There is safety for thee only in Rome and by the grace of the ruler, Augustus.

"Fare thee well. Thine in bonds,

SALOME.' "

"What sayest thou, Panthera? Peradventure thou

art the friend of Herod?" said Joachim, in a bewildered tone.

A resentful flush dyed the cheek of the soldier, but he answered with gentle dignity.

"I, I am the friend of those who deal justly, love mercy, and honor the rights of men."

"A strange sentiment coming from a soldier of Rome. Yet, one worthy of thy sire. Child!" turning suddenly with a look of concern, as he thought of Mary, "Dost thou fear the Lord hath forsaken thy father?"

Mary was gazing at him with every evidence of fear in her blanched face. Joachim held out his arms and she fairly ran to his embrace.

"Child of my soul!" and he folded her close to his heart.

"If He be for us, who may be against us? Trust him, his arm is not shortened, that he cannot save. His ear is not closed, that he heareth not the cry of his people. Hitherto, hath he been with his servant, thy father, all the days of his life, nor will he forsake him in the hour of death. I will arise and go to Jerusalem. The Lord will raise up friends in my hour of need."

"Amen! The mercy of the Lord sustain thee and thine," fervently ejaculated Joseph, who comprehended the danger threatening his beloved friend and kinsman.

Panthera, the soldier, through a strange premonition of impending danger, threatening his new found acquaintances, instinctively felt the security of his shield, and placed his hand on the hilt of his good two-edged Damascus blade.

Silence fell upon the group. This lasted for only a moment, but during that time Panthera did not resist the privilege of watching the beautiful maid, pillowed

on the breast of her father. Her shapely arms were thrown fondly about his neck, as she was comforted by his whispered consolation of faith.

The stillness was broken by the cry of a wounded animal; a despairing wail ending in a moan of extreme, agonized suffering. It was the cry of the camel, which, if ever heard, can never be forgotten. Every person in the tent was electrified and amazed by the dire and melancholy sound, and all simultaneously made for the outer air. Joseph was the first to pass out, followed immediately by the soldier.

A most astonishing scene met their horrified eyes. Three strange men were in charge of the baggage. The servants were making some show of resistance, but in a feeble way. The burdened camel had been hamstrung with one of the cleaver like weapons in the hands of the intruders.

As Joseph and Panthera came upon the scene one of the servants was prostrated with a blow on the head; the other was dodging those aimed at him, with the agility of a monkey, and, at the same time, calling for help at the top of his nasal voice.

The Roman comprehended the situation instantly. There was no doubt, in his mind, as to the mission of these men. Banditti, bent on plunder, with little or no compunction as to adding murder should it become expedient or necessary. Springing past Joseph, he drew his sword and bounded toward the scene of strife.

"Hold!" he commanded, as soon as near enough to be heard. This surprised the men, who were following the servant, and, before their astonishment subsided, the sword point of Panthera had pierced the neck of one of the marauders. The man fell to the ground with a groan, but his companion, quickly recovering himself,

made a wicked lunge at the head of the soldier, which was skillfully warded away with the trusty shield.

The combatants faced each other for a moment, then the assailant rushed madly at the intrepid young man before him, as though to bear him to the earth by the very impetuosity of the attack. The soldier was a master in defense and, although his opponent was a much more powerful man, it was evident, from the commencement, that the skill of the former would more than equal the brute force of the latter. Yet, it was a dangerous equality, blow succeeded blow, thrust and cut followed each other in rapid succession.

The bewildered servant looked on in amazement, as did Joseph, except that the latter neared the scene of the fight, and, as he did so, the intention came to his mind of assisting, if possible, the generous stranger who was thus placing his life in peril.

It dawned upon the bandit, at last, that there was no certainty of his succeeding with pushing the battle. He changed his tactics to cautious maneuvers and, in this manner, became a more dangerous foe. He was twice wounded and suffering from loss of blood. This goaded him to renewed vigilance and care. Realizing the danger of defeat, he cried out to his companion for assistance.

The third bandit was no where to be seen, but his struggling companion supposed him to be near at hand, perhaps engaging the attention of the meddlesome servants. The soldier now changed his methods, also, forcing the ruffian to fight, in turn, on the defensive, pressing his adversary back, step by step. At the same time he was pleased to see Joseph coming up behind the robber, armed with a large sized cudgel. Panthera now rushed the ruffian back to still more engage his atten-

tion, until Joseph might administer a blow that would either disarm, or place him at such a disadvantage as to end the battle. The blow descended, with all the force at Joseph's command, across the calf of the robber's leg, tumbling him in a heap upon the ground.

Before the soldier could have dispatched the brute at his feet, had he been so minded, the piercing scream of a woman broke upon his hearing. Both he and Joseph started in consternation, scarcely able to tell, from the sound, the direction from whence it came. For an instant they waited motionless. Then the sound of a horse's feet, in a swift gallop, clattering toward the wilderness road was heard.

"My master's child is stolen!" exclaimed Joseph in a voice of despair, as he ran toward the tent.

The bandit lay where he had fallen, too much beaten to offer further menace to the camp.

"Help me with my horse!" cried Panthera to the servant as, sheathing his sword, he ran toward where the animal was feeding.

The man had collected his wits by this time and was the willing assistant in the preparation for the chase.

Disrobing himself of the toga, which he threw to the servant, Caius Panthera adjusted anew the shield and pulled his sword belt a trifle tighter. He mounted, patted the animal quietly on the neck, to quell the excitement incident to the hasty manner in which the high strung, nervous creature had been prepared for the race, and whirled about in the direction of the echoing hoofs.

His erect, secure carriage in the saddle showed him to be no novice in horsemanship, as the splendid beast

sprang forward. The roadway reached, Panthera saw, considerably in advance, the dust of the fugitive.

"Steady, Dion, steady, thou hast served thy master well. Fail not now." The horse seemed to understand and answer back the tones of his master's voice. The muscles grew tense; the veins swelled, till their network stood out over the entire body, as the Arabian bred animal sprang away.

Looking ahead, Panthera saw the horseman before him with a burden supported on one arm. The soldier had no doubt it was the fainting form of the beautiful Jewish maiden. The dust rolled from between pursuer and pursued; Panthera distinguished the color of the maiden's robe, Joseph had divined the truth. Joachim's daughter had been stolen. She who had filled the mind and charmed the soul of her father's guest, as he beheld her, but a short time before, folded in the arms of the patriarch.

It was Melsach, the bandit lieutenant of Solan Hai, who had succeeded in obtaining possession of the maid, with half a Jewish mile the start of Panthera, the Roman.

Dion shook his magnificent head impatiently and chafed the bit. Panthera bent over, seeing a twisted strap about the bridle, he slipped a buckle into place, for a second losing sight of the object of his chase, when he looked up both horse and riders had disappeared.

CHAPTER VI.

A RACE FOR LIFE.

The Roman bent over his horse's neck and urged the faithful animal to its utmost speed, in mortification and chagrin at having allowed himself, to lose sight of the ones he was pursuing. It occurred to him, however, that, in all probability, the bandit had turned into one of the frequent cross ways, the chances were in favor of the direction toward the mountains. His surmise proved to be correct, as, on arriving at where a narrow crossroad intersected the main thoroughfare, Panthera saw, at a much less distance than he had expected, the daring horseman with his precious burden.

Melsach was riding at a moderate pace and had, in some way, succeeded in shifting Mary to the back of the saddle. She appeared to be strapped to the conscienceless scoundrel and could have seen the soldier following, had it not been for a shawl thrown over her head.

Panthera was near enough to observe these details with distinctness. He judged that the hands of the maid were secured and her outcries prevented by some means. That the miscreant had premeditatedly prepared himself, for the expedition, seemed certain from the ease with which he had managed the flight. The horse he bestrode was of the ancient, noble Arabian

race, exceedingly well developed, fine limbs; bony and far apart, beautiful head, with small, pointed ears, the slick, clean body a mass of well groomed muscular fibre; which gave the animal the strength, endurance and fleetness of his time honored progenitors. An animal very similar to the one on which was mounted the Roman soldier, so that the race, for the life and safety of the maiden, bade fair to be a test of endurance between the magnificent brutes.

The new adjustment of his burden gave the fleeing wretch free use of his arms and much better use of his body and limbs. He was an excellent horseman, and rode as though he had been born in the saddle. He had slackened his headlong pace and was riding at an easy canter, apparently, endeavoring to rest and give his horse the breathing spell necessary under the double load.

Panthera took advantage of this and gained rapidly. He was unobserved until the sound of Dion's hoofs roused Melsach from his fancied security. He turned sharply and beheld the bright uniform of the Roman legionary and the glitter of the shield held at his side. Surprise at the near proximity of the apparition made the bandit lose his self possession and he drove his spiked heels into the flank of the horse. The poor creature, unused to such treatment, reared and then stumbled, giving Melsach a trial of all his skill in bringing the animal under control. The soldier never wavered, but momentarily gained on the bandit.

"Dion, thou art swift, swift as the wind!" he cried. "Spare not thy limbs, my good Dion!" and he patted the arched neck with caressing hand.

Again Melsach turned in the saddle to look and beheld the determination in the face of his foe.

Panthera snatched his sword from its scabbard, and the bright weapon scintillated in the rays of the sun. This movement was promptly and defiantly answered by Melsach, who drew the Arabian shaped scimiter and, as he still pushed forward, flourished it over his head in true eastern bravado.

Neither again sheathed their weapons, but held them ready for use.

The way was gradually becoming more of an incline, and the horse in advance gave signs of tiring under the strain of carrying double. He was dripping with moisture and the foam flecked sides throbbed with labored breathing, but the faithful creature still bent willingly to the task and needed no urging from his master.

A crisis must shortly ensue, the horses were only a few lengths apart, each galloping madly up the steep highway.

Dropping the lines upon the neck of his sure footed animal, Melsach quickly unloosened the contrivance holding the maid and swung her lightly over his arm. The movement turned her face toward the soldier and her abundant hair, unconfined, swept downward, reaching nearly to the ground. The shawl had become disengaged in the performance of this feat and, placing his scimiter between his teeth, Melsach skillfully gathered the fluttering folds together and, with a dexterous whirl, sent the garment over his head, so that it fell almost at the feet of the oncoming horse. Panthera, on the alert, anticipated this ruse and held a steady rein on Dion, who passed the bright object without fear or notice.

The soldier was now within speaking distance. "Hold!" he thundered. "Hold! I say."

Mary lay across the pommel of the saddle, helpless, and, as far as Panthera could judge, unconscious; the fair, round neck uncovered, resting on the arm of Melsach. He drew rein as this peremptory command reached him.

"Dost thou want her beautiful head to fall?" he answered, at the same time drawing his murderous scimiter frightfully near the throat of his motionless victim. A gag had been cruelly forced into her mouth; this farther evidence of Melsach's forethought becoming evident as the ruffian turned to speak.

The soldier shuddered as he realized the dastardly cowardice of the diabolical threat. Instinctively he pulled his rein, fearing the wretch might let the knife drop on the delicate flesh. Speechless horror seized him as he comprehended the dreadful alternative offered. Still he dared not hesitate. Forward he must go. Melsach had placed a few paces between them, while Panthera hesitated.

Pressing his knees into the steaming sides of his horse, Dion's master once more leaned forward. He, also, dropped the rein upon the horse's neck. With a short, sharp dash the intervening space was covered. Panthera had resolved to throw himself between the maid and the knife, rather than let her feel its cruel edge.

"Hold thy hand!" he shouted. "Let the fight be between thee and me. Spare her! Let it be my life or thine. Let us finish it like men."

The horses were walking now, side by side, while Panthera boldly glared into the maddened face of his antagonist, who, thus appealed to, flourished his weapon in a wild, devilish manner, gloating over his advantage.

"Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!" A snarling, guttural laugh was his only reply.

"Surely thou wouldst not stain thy soul with her innocent blood!" he exclaimed, desperately, interposing his shield so as to protect the threatened neck.

"No! Ten thousand times no!" shouted the bandit.

He drew his horse suddenly to one side, compelling Panthera to draw back, and the two men were facing each other.

"I possess her by right! Will establish it by might!" yelled Melsach, livid from rage. "I love her. She shall know and worship me; she shall witness the power of my arm; she shall be mine! mine! only mine! Thou white livered dog, shalt thou do battle for thy life? Thou mayest swear by the mother who gave thee birth! Thou wilt never pass this way again. Awake! light of mine eyes, messenger of my soul. Look at thy lover, who dares the world for thee!"

Loosening the gag he flung it in the face of Panthera, who had listened in horrified silence to this unholy outburst of inordinate passion. Seeing the spellbound attitude of the soldier, Melsach again began speaking.

"My love shall behold the battle!" he cried, violently. "She shall be the wager. She shall know that all who come between us shall make their bed in dust; shall sink to the lowest hell. Thou mayest pass whence thou came, but if thou follow me farther, by thine own gods, thou hast not another hour to live. The die is cast. Thou mayest fly—or fight."

Panthera lifted his head in scornful disdain at the alternative offered him.

"I will fight." He said, unspeakable contempt filling his eyes as he gazed at the passion swayed ruffian.

"Then say thy prayers and follow me."

Without more ado Melsach turned off the road and cantered along a by-path. Panthera followed promptly. A short distance was traversed and the horsemen came into a level amphitheater, admirably adapted for a duel.

Melsach untied the hands of Mary, she was free, except from the bonds of fear. As the bands slipped from her wrists, consciousness slowly returned. She looked around on the desolate rocky place, in a weary dazed sort of way, until her eyes took in the form of the soldier, who was restraining his horse, as the animal impatiently pawed the ground.

"Where am I?" Mary questioned, placing her hand to her head in a distracted way.

"With thy lord," answered the ruffian as he lifted her from the saddle, and proceeded to carry her to where a pile of stone and rocks offered a partial shelter from the sun.

She sank weakly to the hard seat and her eyes wandered in search of the form that, a moment ago, had met her vision. Gradually memory asserted its sway, and the distressed daughter of Joachim remembered every detail at the scene of the abduction. She called to mind, clearly and vividly, the scimiter as, with one stroke, it cleaved the back of the tent from top to bottom. The next instant a stranger had entered and, without waiting, grasped her in his arms. Throwing a shawl over her head he had half dragged, half carried her out of the tent, notwithstanding her outcries and struggles.

The last thing she had seen, as the shawl was thrown over her head, was the horror stricken countenance of her aged parent as he attempted to

interfere in her behalf. She shut her eyes and moaned in despair as these consecutive thoughts flashed through her mind with bewildering rapidity and impressive force.

"Where am I?" she again muttered to herself as one recovering from a hideous nightmare. She raised her head, throbbing with pain, and looked up, only to have a horror of darkness, green and black, float before her obscured vision. Still she did not wholly lose her senses. Pressing her head against the cool rock, she prayed the God of her father to sustain her. Then a bright light seemed to blaze up before her. Panthera, the soldier, was speaking. It was his voice, she could not be mistaken, those clear, cool tones she would never forget.

"Melsach, it is my life, or thine. I accept the terms. Her God and my God assist me!"

"Amen!" involuntarily the maid responded to the invocation.

Slowly the frightened eyes of Mary centered on the two men who were now before her, stationed a short distance apart on the level green. Everywhere about were the cold gray rocks; above, only the blue sky, like a great vault, enclosing this scene of impending conflict, and shutting her in with a nameless terror and hopeless dread of coming disaster, perhaps death, to Panthera, who now was willing to risk, perchance surrender, his life in her behalf. Her vision cleared and her mind became concentrated on the opponents. Like the charmed bird, she was fascinated, chained to the spot, unable to move had she so desired.

She contemplated the form and bearing of her self-appointed defender.

The soldier was clad in the close fitting Roman tunic

which displayed his well made, muscular body, and the length and symmetry of his limbs and arms, the latter bare and only concealed by the shield.

Across the breast was a curiously interwoven network of silver chains, burnished to a marvel of brightness, that glittered at every movement of the graceful body. The tunic was otherwise trimmed with fine gold lace in circular design—a costly apparel in the most elegant and perfect taste.

A shout, from the bandit, broke discordantly upon this momentary pause. He rode to the far side of the arena and turning sharply, faced his adversary. The next instant the two horses were approaching each other at a mad gallop. Two men, with set features and drawn weapons, were bending over their horses' necks as if to precipitate the dread encounter, impatient, apparently, of even the unusual velocity of their animals.

Melsach had divested himself of every vestage of clothing that could have impeded, or hindered, the free use of his scimiter, which he whirled over his head. His dark features and flashing eyes were alive with the maddened passion seething within his pitiless breast. With a torrent of eastern invectives, launched at his antagonist, he goaded his willing animal to the fray. His massive form was convulsed with energy and desperation, the great veins swollen in his neck, and the cords of his body, limbs and arms at the utmost tension of excitement.

On! On! they rushed. To Mary it seemed that no power on earth could stay the terrible onslaught.

Crash, came the two horses together. Slash, cut, thrust, the ring of steel, and the two men, side by side, their horses flank to flank, fought, pushed, crowded

and struck until the horses, by their desperate plunging, separated the riders, and the combatants once more guided their animals to opposite sides of the natural arena.

The maiden closed her eyes to the awful sight. The clash of arms and the din of fight rang in her affrighted ears. He must not, shall not fall. In her desperate strait, Mary fell upon her knees and cried out to the God of Israel to stay the hand of Melsach.

CHAPTER VII.

THE HORSEBACK DUEL.

The furious bandit became surprisedly aware that he had met his equal in fight and endurance; to vanquish his formidable antagonist would tax his utmost skill and strength. He had felt the power and dexterity of the arm wielding the sword, and he was sensibly admonished of the danger that might ensue from any over confidence, or carelessness, on his part.

There was no time to waste or wait. Once more the men faced each other. The presence of the silent witness, while not forgotten, was certainly ignored in the attending excitement.

Again, the combatants advanced, each with more caution, but nevertheless, with the same terrific impetuosity. The animals, frenzied by the battle, acted much like human beings in the manner of their fiend-like onslaught. Rearing to an attitude almost erect, they fell upon each other in hostile fury, striking with their sharp hoofs, kicking and biting savagely.

Again the cut, slash and thrust, of the men, waged deadly conflict; again the warlike ring of steel against steel; again they wheeled, crowded, rushed and turned in desperate effort to obtain advantage, or inflict mortal injury.

Mary, with difficulty, restrained an overwhelming desire, which seized her, to throw herself between the

plunging horses; to end, at any hazard, the frightful struggle that numbed her young heart and horrified her timid soul.

This encounter, taking place before the tenderly reared maiden of culture and refinement, whose sensibilities were not only shocked, but outraged, as well, must, in the nature of things, have left an indelible impression on her youthful memory.

She had been seized by a dastardly ruffian, whom she had never looked upon before, snatched from the sheltering protection of the loving father, who had hitherto been a refuge in every storm, a tower of strength in every difficulty, and placed in this alarming situation, compelled to witness a combat between two men, and that unto the death.

She had not heard the wild challenge of Melsach; did not know that the splendid Roman fought to defeat the outrage commenced by Solan Hai's friend, which would end, were the bandit victorious, in infamy and shame—worse than death, the extent of which her youth and innocence could scarcely comprehend, yet, a faint realization of the possibility of separation, from home and kindred, stole into her bewildered senses; a dread of dire calamity, dark as the blackness of night.

There came over her spirit a longing that rather than submit to be thus lost to her own, she might have granted to her another alternative, and be mercifully permitted even to die and depart to that better life, where experiences, such as this, could not come.

Mary shivered as if she had stepped on some loathsome reptile; yet her eyes were burning in their sockets, and her head felt as though it might burst; the tapering fingers were clinched, the nails embedding themselves in the palms of her hands; she felt the peculiar

sensation of each particular hair seeming to stand out and apart from every other; her throat was parched and her tongue cleaved to her mouth. She was unable to articulate or cry out.

“Was there no deliverance? Was there no hand to save?”

Crash! A blow descended upon the head of the soldier, his helmet fell, shattered. At the same moment, his sword inflicted an ugly wound upon the body of his opponent, from which the blood flowed, discoloring the whiteness of the animal so valiently assisting in the unholy undertaking.

The excited horses rushed madly at each other; the one under Panthera, in a fury, buried his teeth into the neck of the other and held on like a vicious dog. Exasperated at this, Melsach, before the soldier could hinder or avert the impending stroke, brought the heavy blade of his scimitar, with deadly force, across the neck of the unfortunate Dion. The blow severed the artery and the blood forced its way from the wound with such velocity as to drench the treacherous robber; the hot, spurting fluid striking him full in the face and blinding him. Dion had relaxed his vicious hold, but before Panthera could follow up the advantage, given him by the momentary confusion of the bandit, and finish the struggle, Melsach's horse became unmanageable and carried his rider to the extreme end of the arena.

Dion made no sound or indication of suffering; for a brief time the beautiful creature stood as if dazed, then plunging a short distance forward, fell heavily, the knees first striking the earth; then, partly falling, partly rolling, he dropped on the hard ground. Panthera,

quickly extricating his feet from the stirrups, sprang from the saddle barely in time to escape being crushed.

"My poor horse!" he exclaimed. "Fare thee well! My noble Dion!" and in his grief at the loss of this, almost human companion he for once forgot the strife, forgot that his foe threatened.

The animal at his feet, raised his head, with a last effort, and turned a look of affectionate pleading toward the master from whose hand there had never been aught but kindness and gentle treatment. The film of death gathered across the velvet eyes, and the head sank back to the sward. Panthera could not longer look upon the death scene, could not bear to behold the life-blood welling from the gaping wound. He turned away from the last struggle. In this attitude he listened to one vain effort of Dion, as he attempted to rise, a short convulsive struggle, a scraping of feet along the ground and a fall—it was ended.

It was no time to indulge his sorrow, imminent danger threatened his own life, for Panthera beheld his foe in the act of returning with drawn sword and bared head.

With his old and tried friend dead at his feet, for a breast work, the soldier stood facing his mortal enemy. There could be no mistake. The bandit would attempt to ride him down, leap over him, or, passing closely by, cleave his almost defenseless head. The soldier realized the desperate disadvantage under which he was placed, but resolved to sell his life at the highest price. Standing behind his only available rampart, firmly bracing himself for a determined defense, he resolved to do battle to the last, in the forlorn hope that in some manner, by some lucky chance, a way might open for his escape, and the rescue of Mary. It

would be vain to think, useless to ask, or, even sue for quarter. It must be his life or that of the bandit. There could be no compromise.

The thundering click of galloping feet once more resounded on the hard earth. Faster, faster; nearer, nearer, it came.

A glance to the side, a fluttering object was approaching. Panthera dared not turn, still he felt a new presence near the spot where soon the fight must be renewed.

"Merciful Heaven!" breathed Panthera.

It was the maiden, rushing toward him, as swiftly as her limbs could transport her. Hair streaming, arms extended. On, on she came. Her face was partially turned in the direction of the oncoming horseman with a staring look of fear and horror. She threw herself boldly in front of the advancing charger, scarcely a length away. With a wail of anguish and fright she sank upon her knees, her arms thrown upward in an attitude of supplication.

"Across my body!" rang out in an unearthly, despairing scream.

The rash movement of the maid caused the horse to take fright, and he bolted with such force as to throw the bandit. Melsach was taken entirely unawares, and was able to extricate but one of his feet from the stirrups, the other held him fast, and threw his ponderous body against the feet of the frenzied animal. The unfortunate man made vain efforts to recover himself, but was carried toward the mountain road, every bound dashing his body violently against the rocks by the way.

Mary had fallen forward in a swoon. Panthera realized the situation, the fate of the bandit and the

marvelous good fortune which worked his deliverance, and the preservation of them both—she from shame and he from death.

Leaping over the body of Dion, he sprang to the assistance of the damsel. Gently lifting her in his arms, he carried her, as though she were a child, to the shady side of a sheltering rock. Here he placed her as comfortably as possible under the circumstances. Alarmed at the deathly nature of the swoon, he was about to look for the wine bottle, which he might find in the trappings of the murdered horse, when, glancing at the maid, he saw the lovely eyes slowly opening.

Pleased at the evidence of returning consciousness, Panthera bent over and gazed into her face, but her eyes immediately closed again and she did not seem to hear his quick spoken assurance of their safety. Gradually the color returned to the fair face, relieving Panthera of his alarm and apprehension as to serious results to her from this adventure.

The soldier waited patiently at Mary's side. A sudden movement of returning energy threw the arms of the maid upward over her head and, but for the intervening hand of Panthera, the soft flesh would have been bruised against the jagged rock. An instant more and the damsel was looking fully and sensibly into the face of her attendant.

"Art thou better?" inquired Panthera.

"My father, take me to him." Memory asserted its sway, a look of utter horror shot across her features and she raised herself from the hard rock. "What has happened?" she questioned. "Where—"

"Thou art safe, dear lady. Thou need'st have no fear," answered Panthera, and he waited respectfully, ready to anticipate her slightest wish.

Her face was yet sickled over with the pallor of extreme weariness and fright. Yet the Roman had never looked upon a more beautiful countenance.

"Thou art Caius Panthera?" she asked at length.

"Yes, dear lady."

"Where is the other —"

"He will trouble thee no more," was the quiet answer.

The dread visible in her face and attitude revealed the fear passing through her mind and Panthera hastened to reassure her.

"The unfortunate man was thrown from his horse. The animal ran away dragging his master."

Mary put her hands over her eyes, as though to shut away the mental picture that came to her.

"How terrible!" She shuddered, then with a swift glance of gratitude. "Oh! thou art my deliverer."

"The credit must be to thyself, rather art thou the savior, deliverer of us both."

"I—Oh no!" and the maiden could not find words with which to continue. Yet she could not allow modesty on his part to give the credit to her.

"Thou knowest I am the daughter of Joachim, and that my father is—" and again she paused in confusion, encountering the eyes of Panthera.

"Is among the best and noblest of thy countrymen," added he assisting her, "and thou art his only daughter, perchance. Wilt thou tell me thy name?"

"Mary, is my name," she replied, frankly.

Panthera rose to his feet, the problem of returning the confiding child to her people was troubling him.

"Thou art blessed with the dearest name that is given to thy sex," he said.

"Must we stay here long?" asked Mary, looking up

at her companion. "Wilt thou return with me to my father?"

"Let not thy heart be troubled. Thou shalt wait not a moment longer than when thou mayest be strong enough to attempt the journey."

"I am strong enough now. We must not delay." The brave little maid would have started to her feet, but the effort discovered her weakness. Had it not been for the prompt support of this stranger she must have fallen. She slipped down on the rocks again, a discouraged expression slowly darkening her eyes.

"Thou must know that we are far from the camp of thy father," Panthera gently said. He had it in his mind that they would have to walk back. "It is fully a day's journey."

"So far," she cried in dismay, "but, Joseph will come after me. He is the kinsman of my father."

"Very likely so," replied Panthera. "We must reach the mountain road lest he pass us by and continue on the straight way."

"The mountain road," repeated Mary, incredulously.

"Did'st thou not know? Wert thou unconscious all the way?"

"I knew I was going, going, and thought the journey would never end. I do not think I was entirely unconscious all the time. I heard thy voice when thou did'st overtake the man. What was the ugly name he called himself? After that everything was blackness until I recovered during that terrible struggle. How shall I ever recompense thee?" she exclaimed, excitedly. "I cannot thank thee. My father shall reward thee."

"Hush!" he said, wishing to turn her mind from her frightful experience. "We will have to make the

journey on foot. Thou knowest that my horse was killed."

"Alas, yes!" she answered.

"Thou art scarcely able to stand," he said. "If thou would'st rest here, I might attempt to find the other animal. He may not have gone far, dragging so heavy a weight."

"Do not leave me," cried Mary, alarmed. "Where ever thou goest I will go. I am stronger than thou thinkest." She arose determinedly, and prepared to accompany him. Accepting the support of his arm, she boldly and firmly stepped out toward the mountain road.

Panthera, mentally ill at ease, saw the tracks of the runaway horse, and feeling the frail hold on his arm, hoped against hope that the means of conveying the damsel down the mountain might be near at hand.

CHAPTER VIII.

BACK TO THE CAMP.

Never, in all the remembrance of the young man, had he experienced so complete a satisfaction as permeated his being on that cloudless morning while walking toward the highway. He had not calculated, or anticipated, that this stage of the journey would be so long.

He had followed Melsach, into the arena, under the stimulating influence of the undertaking then confronting him, and the pathway had been covered without heed to its length. Therefore, he was much surprised at the time consumed in traversing the bridle path before they came in sight of the way leading down from the hills.

Had it not been for the excusable, natural concern and urgency, which Mary could not refrain from expressing, Panthera would have been content to linger much longer on the way, so sweet and interesting was the conversation with the maiden walking at his side.

Nervously and anxiously he watched ahead, fearing, at every turn, to discover the lifeless body of the bandit, which, without doubt, would be found somewhere as they advanced. They observed, at intervals, evidence of the direction taken by the affrighted horse and his luckless rider; portions of the accoutrements of the animal, as well as, shreds of the clothing worn by Melsach.

Before starting Panthera had taken the precaution to secure the scimiter, found near the spot where Mary's tragic interference had decided the fate of herself and her guide; that there might be no mistake, he carried this with him, that if, by any chance, the ruffian should have escaped death, there would be no possibility of rearming himself.

At length the trained eye of the soldier discerned an object, the nature of which could admit of no doubt. Moving quickly, he walked with Mary some distance from the pathway, requesting her to rest, while he went forward. With an inquiring glance she searched his face, the truth flashed into her mind, the horror of it almost overpowering her sorely tried strength. With an effort she signified her willingness to await his return.

"How kind and considerate thou art in every thing!" she murmured, her eyes filling with tears of gratitude.

"Rest," he replied, "I will be absent but a short time."

He could not refrain from giving expression, through his eyes, of the pleasure he derived from the words of appreciation, falling so unaffectedly from her lips. It was not the impudent stare of inordinate admiration, but, rather the fraternal greeting reaching out from a soul void of offense, which, by reason of its manly purity, commands confidence and trust.

Until he passed from her range of vision, Mary's gaze followed the retreating form of Panthera. A sigh escaped her, as a bend in the pathway hid him from view. A realization of her utter dependency upon this stranger came over her spirit; this was followed by a feeling of despondency and despair, as the interval marking his absence lengthened.

Panthera, indeed, was long at his task. To remove and conceal the shapeless thing, that blotted the fair beauty of the landscape, required time, and he did not choose to leave a trace of the tragedy to further shock his precious charge.

In the meanwhile, suspense and overwhelming doubt surged through the mind of Joachim's daughter, with a fear of impending evil that she attributed to the distressing experiences through which she had been compelled to pass. Notwithstanding this course of reasoning, the uncanniness deepened into gloom, impossible to master or throw off, until she sprang up, from where she had reclined, and, in the bitterness of her soul, would have screamed, the hysterical spasm so held her within its grasp, had it not been that in looking toward the spot where her protector had disappeared from view she beheld him returning.

He was light and brightness to her; his presence dispelled her dark forebodings; from his cheerful face beamed the light of hope, strength and consolation. Only for the restraining influence of the natural sense of modesty, and a deference to propriety, she would have manifested her joy by running to meet him. As it was she waited, in strange agitation, which increased as he approached. She sank back to the rocky seat, trying in vain to compose herself, half ashamed of the emotion that could not fail of attracting his notice.

"Thou art tired, child. This hath been a day of severe trial to thee." Panthera said, compassionately, as he looked into her perturbed face.

Mary could not control her voice, she attempted to rise, but, in spite of her strongest exertions to maintain a show of strength, staggered and must have fallen

but for the watchfulness of Panthera whose strong arm again supported her trembling form.

She was not only tired, but exhausted, and she looked appealingly toward the soldier.

"Do not exert thyself. Save thy strength and courage. We must reach the mountain road. Trust thyself to thy servant."

"I do! I do!" she answered. The next instant his strong arms lifted her from the ground and carried her away from the place.

As though she had been a child, Panthera bore the weight of the exquisite maiden. There was no other way, and Mary submitted to the arrangement with a restful sense of security calming her anxious mind. Her head drooped, in delightful languor, and she eased the soldier's load by the support of her own arm, thrown over his shoulder.

The undulating motion in the movements of the soldier conveyed to Mary the long-ago lullaby of her Israelitish mother.

The unstrung nerves of the maid were soothed, her eyelids closed, sleep—nature's best restorer—gradually overcame her every resistance and the shapely head sank against the neck of Panthera, who, at that moment, would have dared ten thousand dangers, and thanked the gods for the opportunity and privilege, if it could have been in her behalf.

The touch of the warm body of this defenseless, confiding girl, the faint scent of the perfumed ointment, from her glossy locks, the form, the features, all served to send the blood pulsing through his veins with the strength, energy and mystery of love. She was safe in his arms. His heart and his honor were pledged to her service. No sacrifice could be required that this man

was not ready to render cheerfully that he might merit the favor of the one resting trustfully on his breast, fondly, yet gently and respectfully folded in his arms.

The night before, girl-like, Mary had spent awake, anticipating the return journey to her home in Jerusalem. She had arisen, long before the sun, and prepared her belongings, so that everything might be in readiness. The rude shock to these pleasant anticipations: the harsh interruption at the moment of departure for the home of her youth; the impetuous, compulsory flight on horseback, the strain of which was almost unbearable; the furious combat, all worked together to completely tire the maid, and as her bearer covered the road with lengthy strides she fell deeper and deeper into a trance-like sleep.

The soldier gained the mountain way without mishap or accident. From his new vantage ground he looked toward the way he had recently traveled, but saw nothing that gave encouragement. No succor was at hand. He had hoped to find some sort of conveyance that might be secured to carry the maid back to her people; instead, only the oppressive, solitary grandeur of the deserted way greeted him. The road stretched away as far as the eye could reach.

Considering the headlong pace of the pursuit up the mountain, and reckoning the time thus spent, Panthera knew that a tedious journey lay before him. With the girl in her present condition the problem resolved itself into an impossibility. Even were she able to walk, there was a grave question as to whether they could reach the camp before nightfall.

Stepping to the middle of the roadway, Panthera gazed with straining eyes over the downward road. His predicament was becoming serious. Since the

early dawn he had not broken his fast, save in the most meager manner, having partaken only of the wine and biscuits, thoughtfully placed in his saddle bag by Salome. However, he determined to make the best of his way down the road until compelled to give over this self imposed duty.

Glancing in the other direction through the scant foliage of a clump of bushes, not yet in full leaf, he beheld the horse, recently in the possession of Melsach, quietly grazing at the roadside.

Softly depositing his burden on the grass, trusting that the grateful slumber would hold her in its embrace, Panthera determined to secure the animal. In this expedient lay the only method of extracting himself from the dilemma in which he was involved. To carry the girl down the mountain road was an undertaking quite out of the question; as to her attempting the journey on foot, it was equally impracticable; and the probability of a conveyance, going down the mountain, was too remote for consideration.

The animal had stripped himself of every vestige of trappings. Panthera remembered that Dion was completely caparisoned. For an instant he was tempted to run, with all his strength, to where the poor brute had given up his life, and obtain the harnessings, but, fear lest Melsach should have friends in this region, or that the horse might gallop away, during his absence, deterred him from losing sight of either the maid or the animal.

Any hesitation now might be fatal to his plans, and the soldier hurriedly approached the horse. To his surprise, the animal raised his head and came leisurely forward, whinnying in recognition of his presence.

Panthera paused.

"Dion! Dion! Come pet! Come, Dion!"

The horse continued to advance and, at last, put his nose into the outstretched hand of the soldier. Gently and swiftly Panthera reached up, breathing a prayer of thankfulness as he secured a hold on the foretop; caressing the docile creature he patiently, firmly asserted the human will. The horse submitted without resistance.

Coaxingly he lead the animal to where Mary lay, intending to wait her awaking. Scarcely had he paused beside her, however, when the maid moved, turned her face toward Panthera and looked wonderingly at the horse he still held by the foretop. She could hardly persuade herself that it was not the one she had seen stricken down a short time before.

To guard her from harm, to minister to her slightest wish, was the uppermost thought in the mind of the soldier. In this service he would not have exchanged places with any person.

"We will return to my father; my deliverer, my savior," she said and reached her hand to Panthera.

Briefly he explained the situation to her.

"Wilt thou remain here that I may obtain the harness of my faithful Dion?" he asked.

"If thou deem'st it wise," answered the maid, but her voice trembled and betrayed her dread.

"Thou art afraid," said Panthera. "Wilt thou permit me to place thee upon the horse? He is entirely subdued. I will lead him."

Her brightened face answered for the damsel, and without more ado the soldier lifted her to the broad back, where she clung, half alarmed at the unaccustomed position.

Watchfully Panthera guided the horse along the

path, speaking only words of cheer to the maid. Without incident they arrived at the scene of the recent conflict.

Not knowing what might be the effect of a sight of Dion on this newly acquired horse, Mary sensibly agreed to hold the animal while Dion was stripped of saddle and bridle. Standing on a small hillock, she twisted her slender fingers through the mane of the bandit's horse and held him until the trappings of poor Dion were fitted. Panthera then placed her before him on the saddle, and mounting turned in the direction of the mountainway again.

"My father will recompense thee," Mary said.

"Say not so," replied Panthera, fervently. "Acceptance of the small service thy servant hath been able to render thee, shall be mine only reward."

"Not so," replied the grateful maid. "Henceforth thou art the friend of Joachim's daughter."

CHAPTER IX.

A FIXED GULF.

The two traveled down the mountainway, each occupied with a tumult of thought. The inevitable reaction from the excitement came upon them, conversation was indulged in but sparingly and was confined to commonplace matters.

The natural buoyancy of youth restored to Mary much of her usual spirits and the strange experience of the day ceased to burden her. The anticipation of being restored to the arms of her dear, indulgent parent gave the journey an unusual interest and novelty. In these moments of reverie she coned over, in her mind, how she would recount every particular of her adventure. Joseph must listen! Joseph was always interested with every thing affecting the daughter of Joachim. Would he not be indignant when she related all the facts relating to Melsach! What an ugly, ill-sounding name!

What a splendid title—Caius Panthera—and how brave, how kind, how strong he was!

“Father of my heart, and Joseph, his kinsman and friend, they shall listen to all,” she reflected, “everything he did for the poor maid, who was unable to help herself. They will be glad he came when he did. How thoughtful of Salome to have sent him just in time to be of such wonderful assistance.”

The last thought induced a number of queries, some of which gave her alarm and deep concern about the welfare of her beloved parent. She called to mind every word contained in the epistle delivered by Panthera.

What could be the meaning and import of such a message? Could it be possible that any person might hold ought against her father, who at all times and to all persons was the embodiment of patience, kindness and forgiveness? These questions so impressed her as to cause her to draw closer to the horseman, and a short cry escaped her lips.

"Tell me thy trouble, daughter of Israel;" and he allowed the horse to slacken its pace.

"Who is Salome?" she inquired, turning her head to look into his face.

"She is the sister of Herod, 'King of the Jews.'"

"What knowledge hath she of my father?"

"Salome would befriend Joachim, and preserve him from the designs of her brother, the king."

"What hath my father done that the king should have designs against him?"

"I cannot tell thee, child. I do not know."

"Still thou knowest more than thou care'st to tell thy friend," said Mary, with dignity. "Thou call'st me child, and would'st not disturb thy servant with rumors of evil. Tell me, is my father in danger?"

"I fear that Herod means him harm," was the guarded answer.

"Why should the king seek his injury?"

"Neither can I tell thee that. Herod is a monster. Nothing may stand in the way of his desires. Still Augustus lives and Herod dare not offend the Senate. Thy father hath friends, doubtless they will protect him and his property."

"I do not understand," said the maiden, turning away, "My father hath always been a friend to the friendless and afflicted; he hath neither put his hand to oppression; nor used his tongue for deceit. He, and

all his house, have honored God and kept his commandments."

The soldier gently turned her face toward him again, the bright eyes were filling with tears. The thought of harm to her father frightened her and her emotional nature was stirred to the depths.

"Can'st thou not trust the God of thy countrymen? I have heard it said he never forsook his people, that his arm was mighty to save."

"True," said Mary, steadying her voice. "Thy friend, a daughter of Israel, is rebuked."

"Far be it from me, thy servant, I did not intend to rebuke, but to encourage and comfort thee," earnestly rejoined Panthera, fearing to have, unwittingly, given offense.

"Still it is true. We may—we must—trust him."

Mary bowed her head and remained silent until a short turn in the road revealed, at a distance, a number of persons coming toward them.

"Behold! Are not these thy friends approaching?" Panthera pointed down the highway, and Mary turned her face toward the direction indicated.

The soldier was pleased that something had occurred to turn her mind from uncomfortable and disagreeable surmises. In his heart he knew the king meant no good toward Joachim. Moreover, he was satisfied that the confiscation of the patriarch's property, if not the forfeiture of his life, had been determined upon. A pretext for the consummation of this purpose could be found without much trouble; proof to sustain accusations, even though false, need not be wanting.

All the officers in the kingdom were but creatures of the will of Herod, from the high priest of the Sanhedran, to the tax-gatherer, who collected the one-fourth

of all the people produced besides the obnoxious per-capita tax. Years of submission to the demands of their tyrant, had blunted the perceptions of the unfortunate, ill-governed subjects, until they had come to look upon the extortions as a matter of course, and even further, in hope of individual immunity, had become informers, false witnesses and accusers against the innocent and virtuous, whose only fault lay in the fact of their having been blessed in basket and in store.

At the distance it was not possible to distinguish, with any certainty, the crowd ascending the highway.

The maid relapsed into anxious silence and did not reply to Panthera's inquiry. On his part, he could not repress a feeling of sadness as he contemplated the possibility and probability of parting with her company.

Within a short time quite a number of persons became recognizable among the advancing throng. Foremost was the venerable Joseph.

On seeing the horseman with his burden, the whole company hastened forward. Joseph, the leader, was mounted upon a horse, his followers straggled along in the rear, riding horses and asses; while still another contingent was on foot, some hurrying, others loitering upon the way. It was a motley crowd, whose voluble tongues surprised the soldier as they drew near. Their conversation was not intelligible, but the vehement gestures were plainly to be seen. Something had excited this inflammable people to the highest tension.

As they drew near Joseph turned and addressed his immediate companions. Whatever was said had the effect of putting a quietus upon the expressions so profuse but a moment before. This order or command, whichever it may have been, was passed back among the crowd, producing the same effect; silence fell imme-

diately upon the throng, that had been so boisterous. Their faces took on an appearance of gloom that deepened the nearer they approached.

Mary, conversant with the peculiarities of her own people, became apprehensive of some calamity associated with her father.

Arriving before the maid, Joseph immediately dismounted and bowed himself low to the earth.

"Tell me, Joseph, let not thy handmaiden wait in fear. Tell me I pray thee, what of my father?"

"Daughter of Israel—daughter of the Lord, wilt thou alight?" This was said as Joseph raised himself from the lowly position, and with intention to delay his answer that was too apparent to escape notice.

Panthera swung himself from the saddle and assisted the maid to dismount. She ran to her kinsman with hands outstretched in an imploring attitude.

"Hath anything happened to my father?" she cried. "Why callest thou me 'daughter of the Lord'?"

"Of a truth thou art the daughter of the Lord," and again Joseph bowed before Mary, visibly affected by her distress.

"Then my father is dead?" she exclaimed, wildly.

"Thou hast spoken," answered Joseph.

Mary uttered a heartbroken cry and, turning, ran to Panthera. Her blanched face appealed to his tenderest sympathies, unmindful of the gaping Jews, he drew her to his breast, where she clung, quivering with uncontrollable grief.

Joseph gazed on this scene in dumfounded amazement, completely surprised by the unexpected demonstration. To his Jewish sense of propriety, it was nothing less than abhorrent.

Panthera was touched to the heart by the suffering of

the maid clinging to him. He endeavored to soothe her, speaking such words of comfort as occurred to his mind. But what could he say to relieve the one stricken with sorrow, who was convulsively sobbing out the great grief that had fallen so crushingly on her young life. He realized how wholly inadequate was human expression to mitigate her suffering.

The respectful silence of Joseph and his assembled countrymen was at last broken by Mary, who turned her tear-stained face toward them and spoke in trembling tones:

"My kinsman, I pray thee keep nothing from me. Was my father killed?" and she looked searchingly into the face of Joseph.

"The hand of the despoiler was withheld. The Lord suffered his servant to depart without violence," answered Joseph, reverently.

"Speak not in riddles, I implore thee!" exclaimed Mary, going a step nearer him.

"Thy father was stricken to the soul because of fear for thee," answered Joseph, pityingly. "Nevertheless, he fell as one ripe for the harvest. When thy servant and kinsman came into the tent, Joachim had already been taken to the bosom of his father Abraham. The presence of the angel was felt by thy servant, who was sore afraid and bowed himself to the earth. No message came from the lips of thy father—they were forever stilled in death."

"Alas! Alas! The Lord hath saved thy child and gathered thee to thy fathers. I will go to thee—thou can'st not come to me. Alas, my father! Oh, my father!" The abandon of grief melted the sternest of the onlookers. "Take me to him, Joseph. Where hast thou laid him?" sobbed Mary.

"Come and see," he answered.

Placing her hand in his outstretched palm, she passively permitted him to separate her from Panthera.

Leading the maiden to his own horse, Joseph assisted her to mount. Placing his hand on the bridle he turned in the direction of the camp and walked along at her side.

Mary bent her head until her features were almost hidden from view by the veil of wavy hair. Dear youthful soul alone with her heartache and affliction.

The contemptuous Jews did not condescend to pay further attention to the stranger. Led by Joseph and Mary, the promiscuous crowd fell in and began their journey toward the camp of the prophets.

Panthera was aware of the isolation of the Jewish people; their separation from the rest of mankind by reason of education and tradition, as well as political and religious convictions. A painful realization of the gulf fixed between himself and this beautiful Jewish maiden gave him a twing of heartfelt misery akin to despair, as he allowed his mind to dwell upon the peculiarities of this people.

A hopeless loneliness seized him, a longing for one more look into that lovely countenance, some slight token from her by which he might know that he was not wholly forgotten.

He raised his hand to his uncovered head, remembering for the first time the destruction of the helmet. How quickly the delirium of bliss had passed from his grasp, how soon was he plunged into the bitterness of disappointment and mortification. The bowed figure of the bereaved maiden moved away from him, unheeding as a carved statue, and he followed her afar off.

CHAPTER X.

AN APT ROGUE.

Solan Hai waited until the day wore on toward the third hour before manifesting impatience for the return of his messengers.

Alone with his conscience and his cares he could not repress a vision of the benign, saintly face of Joachim, as, long ago, it bent over him, while he lay sick unto death. He remembered the intense heat, the burning thirst and the racking pain. The only hand to succor him had been the gentle one of the Jewish lover of men. He had fanned away the fever and brought the ingrate back to life.

This moody train of reflection produced and developed a condition of wretched discomfort. To such an extent did it oppress him that its heavy weight became almost unbearable. To remain there alone seemed like reaching into an eternity of remorse. It had been a long time since opportunity for communing with his own thoughts had been afforded this man, steeped in law-breaking; the experience was neither pleasant, profitable nor entertaining.

As time dragged on he fumed and chafed under the loneliness and silence reigning about him, solitude unendurable and awful stillness. The very rocks looked down and frowned upon the man, as if in mute reproach at his misspent life; at crimes and offenses, both of

omission and commission, the very names of which were blazoned forth in his mind, and reflected on his fevered imagination with a vivid distinctness—amazing and horrifying to the wretch, distressing his fancy through fear of retribution.

This state of mind was a novel one to the wizard. Never before had he been filled with such dismal foreboding; or suffered such hideous qualms of conscience. A long life of indulged cruelty and wickedness had blotted out, as he supposed, all feelings of compunction for the pain or misfortune which might, in this checkered life, overtake or be the lot of his fellow man. It had been years since gentle pity, or the smallest inclination to show mercy, had found a place in his heart. And now he anathematized himself for submitting to what seemed weakness, or allowing so small a matter as the memory of a kindness to control or hinder the pursuit of his own selfish plans or designs.

Springing to his feet he startled the stillness by horrid imprecations upon the head of every person and everything, dancing like a demon to the refrain of his own diabolical profanity.

In the midst of this terrible scene, the one bandit left alive of the ill-fated expedition, appeared leading his horse. Coming in sight of his chief, the man stood still in astonishment at the furious and fantastic antics.

Solan Hai, catching sight of his companion, reeled toward him, as though well drunken.

"By all the gods cravens fear and fools worship, why dost thou stand there gaping? Speak, dog! or I'll cleave thee to the earth," he exclaimed, furiously.

The man knew not whether to run or stand. He hesitated a moment, then drew his scimiter and assumed an attitude of defense.

"Do not strike thy servant!" he cried.

"Put up thy weapon, fool. Tell thy master why thou art her alone. Where is Melsach—and his brother?"

"Have patience I pray thee. We were unable to secure the treasure—"

"Treasure! Treasure!" broke in the wizard. "It was not pelf thy master required, it was the life of the prophet, Joachim."

"Joachim! I know nothing of Joachim!" exclaimed the astonished slave.

"Thou dog's son, decieve not thy master. Where is Melsach?"

"I know not. As I live, I know not," and the miserable man covered before his chief.

"Where did'st thou leave him, idiot?"

"The last I saw of him he was riding like mad with a woman before him," answered the bandit, making a desperate effort to speak collectedly. "A soldier of Herod withstood us to the death. His sword pierced the brother of Melsach. A gray-beard, curse him, struck thy servant with a club, knocking his limbs from under him, while engaged in combat with the soldier."

"Soldier! What became of him? Did'st thou kill him?"

"No. He sprang to his horse near by, and followed Melsach and the girl. This left thy honored servant to fight the whole camp. To fly was the only choice, the privilege of which was not to be lightly dispensed with. As I passed the first mountain road, I saw Melsach in the distance, with the soldier in hot pursuit."

"Why did'st thou not repair thyself to his assistance?" asked Solan Hai, frowning darkly.

"It was but a short time before, when the knave left thy servant to care for his own hide as best he might.

One such turn deserves another. Let it be between him and the soldier."

"Did'st thou recognize the soldier?"

"It was Panthera of the German company. A comely fellow with a mighty arm."

"Ah! I know him well. He comes from the islands of the sea. Barbarian, but, as thou sayest, 'a comely fellow.' Where did he drop from?"

"I know not. Yet, we had excellent reason to know of his presence," and the bandit stooped to rub his bruised limbs.

"Fires of gehenna!" The wizard stamped viciously. "One dead, the other gone with a woman. No doubt it was Joachim who struck thee. Doth thy calf smart?" A sardonic grin disfigured the countenance of Solan Hai.

"As sore as thy servant's conscience," responded the other. "To leave the treasure in the keeping of two thieving servants, stings like the tongue of a wasp."

"Thou hast behaved well, Costa, my friend. Were Solan Hai a Pharisee, he'd greet thee with an holy kiss. As it is, thou art commended. Get thee back to Jerusalem with all speed. Thou mayest be recognized and troublesome questions asked. Get thee together thy trappings. What thou can'st not conveniently carry, conceal in a secure place. I will forward messages by thy hand. In the meanwhile I must tarry for a short time at Hebron."

The wizard wrote something on a sheet of papyrus and handed it to Costa. Securing his horse he betook himself rapidly toward the highway, leaving his companion to obey orders in his own time.

The destination of the wizard was Hebron and, as

soon as the roughness of the way would allow, he mounted and traveled along at a goodly speed.

On the journey he observed a number of people hurrying away from the town. Something out of the usual course of events must have occurred to bring so many persons into the highway. They were all moving in the same direction, and as they passed he caught many expressions of resentment and grief, coupled with the name of Joachim, which caused him to believe that the excitement concerned the camp recently raided by his emissaries. His curiosity was aroused and he inquired the cause of the commotion.

He quickly learned the facts connected with the death of Joachim, and this, coupled with the information he received from Costa, caused him to retrace his steps, as soon as he could do so without arousing suspicion, and endeavor to overtake his companion whom he had ordered to Jerusalem.

He was fortunate enough in this undertaking, meeting Costa as he was merging out on the Jerusalem way. Had it not been for the horse, with which the wizard was familiar, he would not have recognized his minion, so well was he disguised.

"By the gods, Costa, thou art an artist. Thine own mother would not have known her son!" exclaimed Solan Hai.

"The compliment giveth thy servant pleasure," answered Costa. "Were Panthera to return to Jerusalem, the road would be covered with meddlesome soldiers."

"Thou hast Herod's safe conduct."

"True, but accidents might happen that would make it uncomfortable for thy servant," and Costa leered cunningly as he gave a sidelong glance at his master.

Solan Hai reflected, making no comment on the remark of Costa.

"I will look after this Panthera," the wizard said, at last, "and, if possible, keep him here. Joachim, in some unaccountable way, took it upon himself to leave this world—which was a mighty accommodation to Solan Hai."

"Then it must have been another who struck thy servant?" said Costa, in surprise.

"In all probability, yes. A debt thou can'st cancel some time in the future," answered Solan, grimly. "Return me the message I gave thee. I will entrust thee with one of more pleasing import."

Drawing a package from the folds of his garment, Solan Hai wrote and folded another note. This he handed to Costa, receiving from him the first message.

"Take this piece of gold," and the wizard pressed a glittering coin into the greedy, out-stretched palm, "It will heal thy troubled conscience from the mishap of the morning. Deliver the message to Falodia, the lawyer. Do not travel in such a hurry as to excite suspicion, neither lose thou any time."

"Thy servant will not forget the instruction of his most gracious master," Costa said, as he turned his horse toward Jerusalem.

Solan Hai watched him until out of sight.

"The rogue seems apt," he muttered. "More so than I had thought. He is bound to me by past favors and immunities; besides, he fears me—which latter consideration is most to be counted on. I must spend some time in looking after this Panthera." This last thought started him on his journey toward the scene of excitement.

Thoroughly acquainted with the crossroads and

bypaths of the region he had no difficulty in again overtaking the crowd of chattering Hebronites. Mingling with them he soon learned a full account of what had happened during the morning.

The news had been carried to Hebron by the frightened servants of the venerable Joachim, and a multitude had at once proceeded to the assistance of Joseph. The stragglers, with whom Solan Hai now found himself, were also bound for the camp.

After the consternation, owing to the death of their countryman, had somewhat subsided, the assembled Jews turned their attention to the matter of the daughter. Joseph's statement as to the abduction raised a hue and cry, and all were for starting at once to the rescue. Scant means for pursuit were at hand, but Joseph mounted the horse of the dead bandit, and his followers made the best of their way after him.

They started from the camp at about the time Solan Hai was giving the new instructions to Costa, and easily followed the track of the abductor and his pursuer. It was not long before they met Costa, who, certain of his complete disguise, did not hesitate to engage the crowd in conversation.

Coming up to Joseph, he recognized him as the "gray-beard" of the cudgel and determined to accost him. The soreness had not yet departed from the bruised limb of the defeated robber. He was still smarting from the effect of the blow delivered by Joachim's friend.

"Peace be with thee, and this goodly company," Costa said, deferentially. "What, I pray thee, hath occurred?"

"In daylight—the sun being half an hour high—the camp of Joachim was attacked by bandits," answered

Joseph. "Thou art a stranger in these parts else thou had'st heard of the matter."

"Truly, I come from Bersheba, a good morning's journey."

"Thou hast said the truth. It is a fair morning's journey," replied Joseph kindly, having formed a favorable opinion of the stranger.

"And art thou in search of the robbers?" queried Costa.

"Alas!" answered Joseph. "We go to find Mary, Joachim's daughter. She was carried away by one of the robbers, and her beloved father is no more."

Horror was plainly depicted on the countenance of the hypocritical Costa.

"Most venerable friend," he said, with mock gravity. "Thy servant shall make complaint to the captain of the king's guard, who will send thee soldiers, to prevent the occurrence of outrages like this."

"Joachim was well beloved by all his people. Herod will remember him, no doubt."

"Indeed, yes, without doubt," thought Costa. Aloud he said: "In Jerusalem and in Jerico, none were known better than thy friend Joachim. I am informed that he carried large treasure?"

"Yea, verily, a goodly sum at all times," said Joseph, and Costa fairly groaned.

"No wonder thy indignation waxeth hot at the thought of robbery"—and the bandit could not repress another expression of regret. Joseph nodded approval, entirely misinterpreting the cause of Costa's commiseration.

"I, myself, struck a blow in defense of our friend," said Joseph, with some satisfaction. "By my might one of the robbers was felled to the earth."

"So? No doubt he'll remember it to thee." Costa chuckled to himself, though his face remained unfathomable.

"God forbid," said Joseph, devoutly. "I have no grudge against him. I forgive him as I expect forgiveness."

"Peace be with thee. May thou find the robber and smite him with thy strong arm," said the polite stranger as he rode briskly away, after bowing to the gathered throng and saluting Joseph.

The wizard had followed slowly after Costa and reached the cavalcade on the way to the little camp, which he had it in his mind to visit. But, meeting Joseph and his friends, as they came to the road leading up the mountain, he mingled with them and was an eye witness of what occurred when they met Panthera. Listening intently, observing every expression of the actors in the distressful scene and the attitude of the soldier toward the beautiful maid, he drew his own conclusions and acted accordingly.

Allowing his horse to walk leisurely after the procession until they came to the road leading to Hebron, the wizard drew rein and waited until overtaken by Panthera.

"Panthera, of Herod's German retinue, if I mistake not?" he said, addressing the soldier.

"Caius Panthera is my name. Whom have I the honor of addressing?" was the deliberate reply.

"Solan Hai, the friend of Herod," and the wizard threw back his cowl, which had, up to this time, almost concealed his features.

"Chancing to be in the vicinity I was attracted to the spot and witnessed the meeting of yourself and this people. Surmising that you might not be familiar with

some of their customs, it occurred to me that I might be of use to you."

"In what respect, pray?" asked Panthera, distantly.

"Among this people, it is the custom to mourn seven days. The young woman began her mourning when she turned from you to her own," remarked Solan Hai, insinuatingly.

"Thou art a Jew?" asked Panthera.

"A half one. Idumea is the land of my birth," said the wizard quietly.

"Where will they bury—Joachim?" asked Panthera. It was on his tongue to say "the father of Mary," but he realized that Solan Hai was narrowly watching him.

"They will bury him to-morrow, before the going down of the sun," replied Solan, ignoring the flush on the soldier's face. "The next day is the Sabbath. If thou wilt, thou may'st tarry with a friend and kinsman of thy servant whose abode is at Hebron. The sepulchre wherein they will lay Joachim is in the field of Ephraim, where his fathers have been laid before him."

Panthera hesitated, the stranger did not favorably impress him, but he must not neglect an opportunity of remaining near the sweet maiden. Even should this hospitable offer be only a blind for treachery, he would accept it for the sake of, possibly, knowing more of Mary, of again speaking face to face with her. He turned his horse into the Hebron road and accompanied Solan Hai.

CHAPTER XI.

A FRIEND OF THE KING.

The camp of Joachim presented a new scene from the happenings of the day. The crisp grass was worn and crushed by the trampling of many feet. The presence of groups of Jews from all the surrounding country lent animation to the heretofore silent place. When occasion required conversation was carried on, but, in undertones, as though to leave undisturbed the stillness about the tent where the body of the patriarch was laid. The sides of this tent were rolled up and a number of persons were seated on the ground about it.

The embalmers had prepared the spices of myrrh, aloes and spikenard, which gave forth an overpowering scent, filling the air with sweetness. The watchers were decorous and solemn in their behavior and quiet in their movements. Every step was measured and careful and a look of gravity, like a covering of intense sorrow, was upon the faces of these people.

The Jewish merchant had been well known and universally esteemed among his countrymen who resided in this region. Many of them had been recipients of his bounty and assistance in various ways. They knew him as one who never turned a deaf ear to the story of distress; whose active controlling life-work had always been on the side of his people in every struggle affecting their welfare. His wealth had made him a power, felt among the Israelites only for their

good. On this day many could not refrain from weeping, telling the story of a lost friend, and mighty man, who had fallen.

The sufferings of the poor, wounded camel had been mercifully ended by the servants. With the aid of friendly hands they had consigned the carcass to a deep grave dug on the spot. The folded tents had been again erected for the convenience of those who watched and for others who came to lend their aid to those in need. All these people, gathered about the camp, were now waiting for the arrival of Joachim's daughter.

As the day lengthened much anxiety was felt lest Joseph had been unsuccessful in his quest and they would be called upon to mourn the loss of the damsel, also.

At last, when the day was well nigh spent, the waiting Jews saw the rescuing party approaching. Joseph and Mary were in the lead as they traveled along on the mournful journey. The maid had vouchsafed but little speech to the sorrowful Joseph, and now, oblivious of him, she turned her horse in from the highway and rode directly toward the tent, where lay all that remained to her of her best beloved friend.

Dismounting, she accepted the proffered arm of Joseph, who led her to the bier. One of the attendants, after a pitying glance into her convulsed face, turned down the pall and allowed the damsel to gaze on the features of her father, still and cold in the dreamless sleep that knows no waking. The heart-stricken daughter fastened her eyes for a moment on the non-responsive countenance, then fell upon her knees weeping and kissing the stony face. She clung to the lifeless form and would not be comforted.

"My father, Oh, my father!" she sobbed. The cry cut deeply into the emotional natures of the sympathetic Israelitish friends who listened and beheld the anguish and tenderness lavished on the remains of Joachim.

Many women from Hebron and the vicinity had gathered in to lend whatever assistance might be within their power. They mingled their motherly and sisterly expressions of grief, their lamentations and broken sobs with Mary's sorrowing cries; turning the place into mourning as could no other tribe of people. The men were not exempt in this respect and the tears streamed down their sun-burned faces in genuine commiseration for the suffering of the maid, who, in so brief a time, had been subjected to startling experiences and called upon to pass through this bitter ordeal.

In the midst of this uncontrolled grief the Rabbi arrived from Hebron. With his patient, living, loving words he succeeded in pouring the oil of consolation upon the troubled souls of this sorely pressed people, whose affections had been broken up so suddenly. His timely encouragement found a place in the minds of the hearers and went far to still the tumult and bring them to a sober consideration of the reality surrounding the scene of death—the inevitable, yet merciful appointment of God.

"Joachim, beloved of the Lord," the Rabbi said impressively, "like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob hath died in a good old age, an old man and full of years; and was gathered to his fathers. Let not thy mourning, Oh, my people, be as that of those who have no hope. Remember the angel message to Moses when his people were afflicted. From the burning bush the voice declared: 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of

Isaac, and the God of Jacob'—not the God of the dead but of the living.

"Mark the perfect; behold the upright—for the end of that man is peace.

"God is our refuge! A present help in trouble. Let thy trust be in him. Yea, in the shadow of his wings, make thee thine hiding place, until these calamities be over passed. Trust in him at all times. Pour out before him all thine heart's grief. He is a shield, a buckler, a tower of strength to those who put their trust in him.

"Unto God, the Lord, belongeth mercy; for he rendereth unto every man according to his work, and unto him belong the issues from death.

"The mercy and goodness of the Lord are from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear him, and his righteousness unto children's children. Men shall be blessed in him. All nations shall call him blessed."

Turning to where the bereaved maiden still bent over the form of Joachim, the revered man extended his hand.

"Come, Mary, daughter of the Lord. Take thou the hand of Joseph, thy kinsman, thou shalt be in his care."

Joseph moved forward and clasped the trembling fingers as Mary mechanically obeyed the Rabbi.

"Joseph, friend and kinsman of Joachim, henceforth thou hast a double charge. This child must be as thine own, and a sister to thy children."

The Rabbi ceased speaking and Joseph led the maiden from within the tent.

Thus came the night, following upon a day crowded with events which ever marked and marred the after life of the gentle creature, who had been so full of life and beauty, strength and hope, at the rising of the morning sun.

Truly, what may a day bring forth? Are the steps of a man ordered?

On the next day, the day before the Sabbath, Joachim was buried in a sepulchre over against Hebron in the land of Judea, and Mary mourned for him, with great and sore lamentation, seven days.

It came to pass, during the time of her mourning, that her heart went out to Caius Panthera and her soul yearned for the comfort of his presence; but, she preserved this within her own breast, and was afraid to speak of the matter to Joseph.

Solan Hai conducted the soldier to one of the most pretentious dwellings in the village, where he was hospitably received and entertained by one Simon, whose surname was Gatzor, a trader and merchant of Hebron. The household of this person consisted of himself, his wife, Mariam, and their daughter Alta, a handsome woman of the dark Jewish type.

Sumptuous apartments, luxuriously furnished, were placed at the disposal of their guest, and Panthera was well pleased with his surroundings in the Jewish home.

Constantly watchful of Solan Hai and mistrusting his kindly offices toward himself, the Roman observed that the wizard was on the most familiar, and apparently friendly terms with the host and hostess.

No effort was spared to render Panthera comfortable and place him entirely at ease. While this did not in the least flatter the soldier, he, for want of a better arrangement, contented himself and accepted the courtesies offered, as only the most exquisite breeding makes possible.

That the wizard had some villanous design beneath this show of friendship, the soldier had not the smallest doubt. Yet, he held the man in contempt, feared him not at all, and decided that a few days spent in the place would not be wasted.

The particulars of the exploit in the mountain arena, with Melsach, became public property in a remarkably short time. The account was highly colored, making Panthera the hero of the hour. The inordinate curiosity of Mary's countrywomen had intruded upon the sanctity of her mourning, and she had been compelled to satisfy their craving for the marvelous. All at once the soldier found himself the center of admiration and attraction.

To look out upon the straggling houses and listen to the incessant conversation of Solan Hai was a monotony that at last began to cloy upon the spirit of Panthera. Accustomed to action, loving it, he began to feel that something must be done. Solan Hai appeared to be on intimate terms with every person, so that to make inquiries concerning him was not the part of prudence. Constantly the wizard appeared to go out of his way to cultivate an intimacy with the Roman and, as constantly, he failed to make the slightest inroad upon the reserve with which the soldier surrounded himself. The latter had learned, from the well informed Solan, that the Jewish maiden was sojourning within a short distance of Hebron during the week of her mourning.

It was the fifth day, about the ninth hour, when Solan Hai stepped into the apartment occupied by Panthera, with a cordial greeting, so affectedly cordial indeed, that it had the opposite effect on the soldier to that desired by his visitor.

To possess and share with the king the confiscated property of the dead patriarch, was the plot now uppermost in the mind of the schemer; and to use the soldier in the furtherance of the design was the primary object of this visit. The death of Joachim had paved the way toward the success of the enterprise, the plan of which had been maturing in the fertile brain of the wizard.

To discover, if possible, the why and wherefore of Panthera's presence at the camp and, as a matter of safety, what, if anything, he might know was a preliminary step. At the same time he wished to ascertain in what manner the soldier could best be used in the accomplishment of this matter, either by lending his active interest and co-operation, or as a passive instrument in the deft hands of this wily manipulator of money and men.

Mary must be disposed of in some way, and excuse must be furnished for the seizure of her patrimony. Trusting to his customary good fortune and natural disposition to take advantage of every favorable circumstance, the wizard was cautiously feeling his way, with never for a moment a doubt in his mind of the ultimate success of his plan.

"Thou art aware that thy servant enjoys the confidence, and, I may say, the friendship of the king?" began Solan Hai. insinuatingly.

"So I understand," assented Panthera, quietly.

"I have already forwarded an account of this outrage to Herod, that is, so much of it as I have been able to learn. Thou would'st not think thy friend too inquisitive should he venture to ask thee a few questions regarding this occurrence?" and the wizard seated himself confidentially near the soldier.

"Not in the least," was the unmoved reply, "proceed."

"Thou did'st exchange horses with thine antagonist?" said the wizard, and a keen glance accompanied the question.

"I did. I was compelled to do so. Mine he killed." Panthera answered, measuring the man before him coolly with careless eyes.

"The animal is mine. It had been stolen a short time previous. I recognized him the moment I saw him in thy possession. Fear not; henceforth he is thine, the gift of thy friend." Panthera was gazing searchingly at his companion in silence that disconcerted the speaker not a little.

"A large tract of land is in my possession near-by. This animal, with others, had been running at large. 'Tis a noble beast and it gives me pleasure to place it at thy disposal." A shade of anxiety crept into the face of Solan Hai as he waited for Panthera's reply.

It was no part of Panthera's mode of procedure to give offense to his visitor, and the suave voice almost reassured Solan Hai as the soldier replied:

"Such a gift will serve me well at this time. My loss seemed all but irreparable. I accept with gratitude."

"Mention it not, I pray thee," was the quick reply, relief evident in the wizard's tones. "The body of the robber has been found. There can be no doubt as to the manner of his death. And yet, there will be inquiries made as to the particulars."

"I am ready at any time to give account of my doings in this matter," responded Panthera, noticing the suggestion.

"Of course, certainly. I had no doubt of that. It

was quite opportune, thy presence at the camp when the attack commenced," said the wizard awkwardly, at a loss for words to ask the thing uppermost in his mind, namely, why Panthera had been there at all?

"Perhaps so," answered the soldier, provokingly.

"Thou wast an acquaintance of Joachim?" asked the bland voice, undeterred by the soldier's reserve.

"No, never saw him before," was the somewhat surprising reply.

"Nor his daughter?" added Solan, making a real mistake.

"Nor his daughter," repeated Panthera, with a slight show of impatience.

This lack of acquaintance struck the wizard as somewhat peculiar, still, he did not betray his astonishment, but continued to pry into the matter.

"Did'st thou have business with him?"

"I did, a small matter."

These deliberate replies nettled Solan Hai. He had been so much held in awe by his associates that this treatment was not easily endured. In spite of his intention a threat crept into his next utterance.

"Thou mayest be called upon to answer before Herod's officer as to thy business. Dost thou understand?"

"Perfectly," replied Panthera with indifference.

Solan Hai's ugly brows wrinkled but he preserved the even tones of voice as he continued:

"Perhaps thou would'st tell thy friend about the small matter, so thy servant could report more fully. Thou might'st be saved trouble with the investigation."

"I perceive," answered Panthera, "but, I must decline to further enlighten my friend."

The sarcastic intonation of the last words was not to be mistaken. Even in the dark, as he was, Panthera seemed to be more than a match for the consummate rascal before him.

"For what reason, I pray?" Solan asked after a moment.

"The same I would offer the king's officer."

"And that?" eagerly.

"It would be no concern of his."

Panthera arose, giving the wizard to understand that the interview was at an end. The latter could not fail to accept so broad a hint and, though inwardly chafing, withdrew smilingly in well-feigned friendliness.

CHAPTER XII.

THE TEMPTATION.

Sleep did not bring to Solan Hai forgetfulness of the way in which his inquiries had been parried. He did not dismiss from his mind, nor attempt to disguise from himself, the resentment that had arisen against the soldier, and feverish dreams troubled his rest.

Morning found the mortification and anger of the wizard increased to an extent that boded ill to the Roman. When he dwelt on the nonchalant grace with which the rebuff had been administered, he was incensed beyond bearing, and, in his rage, stamped the floor with his huge feet in impotent fury.

He resolved to ascertain why this adventurer had put in an appearance at so timely an hour. Acting with this purpose in mind he saddled his horse and in the early morning hours was on the road that led to the camp lately occupied by the wise men. As he traveled his face took on a look of malevolence. Anon he smothered some deep imprecations, coupled with the name of Panthera that could not have reassured or pleased that devoted soldier had he heard them.

"I'll teach the dastard, curse him, to insult me; me, Solan Hai!"

The horse jumped from fear at the vehemence of the expression. For some distance the infuriated man allowed the animal free rein while he dug his sharp sandaled heels into the sides of the astonished Arabian.

He did not slacken his headlong pace until the site of the encampment was in view, then he drew rein and sobered himself before his destination was reached.

The servants had remained in charge awaiting the further orders of Mary and Joseph.

Solan Hai dismounted, secured his horse and approached. Both servants arose from where they had been reclining and awaited the advance of their visitor. Coming within a few paces of where they stood, the wizard addressed the men in a tone calculated to inspire their awe and terror.

"Thou knowest me! Thou knowest who I am! Dost thou hear?" The snake eyes of the speaker glittered savagely as he gazed sternly at the servants.

In evident consternation at this abrupt introduction, one of the men stammered:

"Thou art—art—"

"The wizard of Jerusalem, Solan Hai. Thou art right. Now then, look sharp. There must be no trifling between thee and me. Dost thou comprehend?"

The wizard came close to the servants, speaking with compelling intensity.

"We are thy humble servants," blurted out both men, moved by sudden fear.

"Give me thine ears. When the stranger arrived, on the morning of Joachim's death, thou wert here?" demanded Solan.

"Truly hast thou said. We were," answered one; while the fellow servant bowed his head in acquiescence.

"Knowest thou what brought him here?" asked the wizard.

"A horse," promptly replied the most forward of the men.

"Dolt!" exclaimed the questioner. "What was his business, if thou knowest?"

"I know not," answered the man.

"Nor I," echoed his companion.

"Show me the spot where Joachim lay when thou did'st discover him dead," commanded Solan.

Without demur the servants led the way. The tent had not been taken down and Solan Hai followed them into it. One of the servants pointed to the spot, and said:

"Here is where he lay. His kinsman, Joseph, was the first to know. We came at his call."

"Hath anything been moved out of the tent, since then?" asked Solan, as his keen eyes searched the place.

"Nothing, except the body," was the reply.

"Since the funeral, hath Joseph returned here?"

"He hath not," replied the wondering servant.

"Where is he now?" Solan frowned darkly and glowered at the trembling men as though falsehood would bring instant and terrible calamities.

"Joseph accompanied the maid to the home of Johanna, the wife of Melton, on the Jerusalem way, a short distance from Hebron," said the man, and as Solan continued to frown without speaking, he added. "Thy servants were ordered to remain here until their return."

Solan Hai seemed to note the speech, but waved his hand toward the entrance.

"Thou may'st depart, but remain within call," he said, and they gladly obeyed the command without question.

Left alone the wizard resolutely and systematically proceeded to ransack every nook and corner of the tent. Everything was turned over and pryed into, nor

did he desist until the undertaking was thoroughly finished to his own satisfaction.

The scrolls and rolls, after a quick examination, he threw from him with contempt. All other writings he secured for further consideration and future reference. Solan Hai's search for the cause of Panthera's presence at the camp of Joachim was quite successful, for, among the writings he carefully and grimly folded together and concealed preparatory to departure, was the message from the king's sister, Salome, which had been overlooked, where it had fallen from the hand of the dead Israelite.

"I'll look these over carefully when I have more time," he muttered, rapidly replacing the articles disturbed in the search so as to leave no evidence of his visit. This arranged, he stalked out to where the servants waited and pausing before them drew his ill-formed body to its most imposing posture.

"Solan Hai never forgives an act of treachery," he began, addressing them with punctilious severity. "Thou wilt forget this visit. Never to mention or refer to it will be the proper thing. Men go to Tartarus who allow their tongues to wag too freely—and women too—sometimes. Dost thou comprehend?"

One of the men recovered himself from the horror of this tirade and answered:

"Most gracious master, thy servants know thy power and will obey thy wishes."

"By so doing thou wilt save thy precious heads," growled Solan. "Here is a piece of gold for each of thee," and he dropped the yellow coins into the palm of the man nearest him. "Regard thyself in the service of Solan Hai, the wizard, who always rewards, do not

forget—*always rewards*, and knows how to punish disloyalty."

Without waiting for reply Solan Hai turned away, walked to his horse and, mounting, retraced his way, without one backward glance, to Hebron and the house that sheltered Panthera.

Later, in the same day, the wizard sought again the presence of the Roman soldier, who received him kindly, without show of displeasure, and as if nothing had occurred to disturb his equanimity.

There was an air of assurance in the demeanor and bearing of the friend of Herod, on this occasion, that did not escape the observation of the soldier. A presentiment seized him that Solan Hai would return to the subject so peremptorily dismissed on the previous day. In this he was not mistaken. The wizard did not keep him long in doubt.

"On yesterday, my friend," he began in a voice from which he vainly strove to eliminate his satisfaction, "I fear thou wast disposed to take offence at what might have seemed to be inquisitiveness on the part of thy servant. Let me assure thee, my inquiries were meant for thy good—only for thy good."

"No doubt, Solan Hai, thou art deeply interested in the welfare of a soldier of fortune with nothing but his sword and strong arm to commend him." Panthera answered, feeling a sort of enjoyment at the discomfiture of his self-styled friend.

"Thou hast most truly voiced my sentiments and disposition. Though I say it myself, it hath always been my way to recognize merit wherever it might be found." The beetle brows moved but a hard smile played about the mouth of the wizard, for he was determined to make the most of this opportunity.

Panthera did not comment, thinking it best to allow his interviewer to unburden his mind in his own way.

"I may say," continued Solan Hai, after a moment, "that many are indebted to thy servant for favors in this respect. I stand well at the court of Herod; am known as the friend of the king."

"Thou hast assured me of that fact on another occasion. I have no reason to doubt thy word." But Panthera's tone indicated that, while he might not doubt the word of Solan Hai, neither did he rate it of consequence.

The wizard controlled the fury that, with any other man to deal with, he would have allowed full sway.

"Tis no light thing to count on the good offices of Solan Hai; I assure thee Panthera, I can be of lasting service to thee," he said earnestly.

"In what respect?" asked Panthera. "Pray come to the point."

"So be it," said the wizard, with a sudden change of tone, "I will. Listen patiently."

"I am quite willing to know of what thou would'st speak," the soldier said. "I am all attention." But his tone conveyed anything other than patience.

"Thou art a soldier without a shekel of gold either in thy purse, or in prospect."

The effect of the words was keenly watched for by Solan Hai. Apparently Panthera was unaffected for he replied calmly:

"For once, thou hast spoken the truth."

The wizard bit his distorted lips, but went on evenly:

"Thou art an alien to the commonwealth of Israel and Rome, as well."

"Quite true," assented the soldier imperturbably.

"My eyes first beheld the light in that far away island beyond Gaul."

"Thy father failed to make terms with Augustus. Fortune was against him and misfortune pursues his son," said Solan.

"My father loved the principles of right," cried Panthera warmly. "He hated deceit. I thank the gods the same noble blood flows in the veins of his son."

Solan Hai had not meant the conversation to take this turn. He hastened to smooth the matter.

"Yes! Yes!" he exclaimed in some confusion. "I quite agree with thee, though we might differ as to the expediency of things. Well, let that pass. A friend, thou knowest, is oft times a necessary and convenient adjunct in the struggle for existence, especially when that struggle is so unequal."

"I believe I understand thee. Thou hast something to offer. Out with it." The soldier condescended to make his replies in a gentle manner, still he but ill concealed his disgust.

"He who might expect friendship, should act friendly," persisted the wizard fawningly.

"Possibly—and even at the expense of his honor," answered Panthera in a tone of bitterness.

"In these matters, we should not make too nice or too wise distinctions," said Solan somewhat impatiently. "Thou art in need of gold?"

"Granted—thou would'st take advantage of the needs of thy friend—proceed."

The penetration of Panthera was not pleasing to the wizard, however, he would not understand the scorn now visible in the face as well as in the voice of the Roman.

"I would place thee in a position where thou would'st

command the very desires of thine heart," said Solan, carefully.

"Explain thyself!" peremptorily demanded Panthera.

"Thou art in love—with the Jewish maiden, the orphan daughter of Joachim," commenced the wizard deliberately. "I know that she loves thee in return and longs for thy society. The sacred law of her race will not permit her to intermarry with one who is not an Israelite. An impassible gulf is fixed between she and thee. I can overcome these difficulties, provide thee a competency, and the woman of thy choice. A ship shall be at thy disposal, within a week thou may'st be on thy way to Italy, or Britain, as thou may'st elect."

Solan paused and looked into the calm, unmoved face of the man seated before him.

"What equivalent am I to render for this forethought; this provision for my welfare; I may say, this disinterested kindness?"

The question was a thrust and the wizard was not exactly prepared for it. The perfect gravity with which it was propounded confused him. Still, he recovered quickly and returned once more to the subject. The object before him was too important to allow a small matter to hinder its accomplishment.

"Thou hast misunderstood thy servant," he said, in a wheedling voice.

"I wait patiently for further enlightenment. Go on," said Panthera, his absolute composure increasing the trepidation of Solan.

"I would do thee a service," reiterated the wizard. "One that most men, in your circumstances, would gladly accept. You hesitate—as though the obstacles were too great and my promises could not be performed. I tell thee, I can do all I say, and more—

wilt thou entertain my proposals, or wilt thou take time to consider them?"

"I will do neither the one nor the other; I cannot." The soldier arose and walked across the room. "I am persuaded," he exclaimed, facing Solan Hai, "that, under the guise of friendship, and service to my interest—my desires—there is a motive that would work wrong and injury to her whom thou hast mentioned. Besides, her wishes have not been consulted. Thou would'st make me a creature altogether like thyself—a thief. I have never willingly given offense to any man, neither will I accept it, least of all from thee."

Panthera had drawn near to the wizard, whose face paled at the denunciation.

"Listen!" thundered the soldier, "Let there be an understanding between us. Let ought of injury come to that innocent maiden—" the soldier paused.

Solan Hai sprang to his feet and glared into the stern face before him with a terrible look of hatred, which was met scornfully. The momentary silence was broken by the wizard:

"Thy life is in the hands of the man whom thou hast seen fit to scorn and defy," he hissed. "Make no mistake, thou art completely in my power."

"That may be true, and yet, I dare thee to do thy worst," cried Panthera, undaunted.

"I offered thee home, riches, the woman of thy choice. All these on one condition—only to take her and depart. I withdraw my offer. I take back my friendship as well. I know thy very thoughts, Panthera. Beware! If thou dost further cross the path of Solan Hai, it had been better for thee if thou had'st never been born." The venomous words fell in a torrent and the wizard clinched his fists while he spoke.

"I have not wittingly or willingly given thee offense, save in this one thing," Panthera said. "Thou would'st tempt me to outrage the purity of an innocent woman. Thou did'st explain the impossibility of honorable marriage, and then thou offerest me a dastardly alternative. Is thy heart so thickened as not to feel thou hast offended past reconciliation?"

"Be it so," sneered Solan. "Thou hast chosen. Let me expose some of the danger confronting thee. Thou art an hireling of the king—his soldier for pay. Thou dost eat and drink at his table only to betray him."

"Thou hast the venom of a snake and the tongue of a false witness," interrupted Panthera.

"Reserve thy judgment lest thou condemn thyself before hand," answered the wizard. "The sister of the king was thy visitor the night thou did'st leave Jerusalem. Doubtless she is thy friend and shall be able to succor thee in the hour of need."

Panthera did not deign to reply and the wizard continued:

"She sent by thee a message, which thou did'st deliver to another with all dispatch. A message, I may say, not complimentary to thy master—who feeds and pays."

The exultant irony of the tone betrayed still farther the base nature of the speaker.

"Suppose all this to be true," said Panthera, "what is it to thee?"

"It is naught to me," cried the baffled schemer. "While I was thy friend I felt thy danger, now, since thou dost chose thine own way, I will tell thee this—thou hast identified thyself with conspirators against the throne of Herod."

"Dost thou mean Joachim?" asked Panthera, surprised.

"Yes, Joachim, the father of the woman thou lovest." Solan waited for a moment hoping for some sign of weakening from the soldier.

"Consider well my proposal of friendship," he continued. "Again I pledge it. Thou may'st have gold—gold, the maiden, home—all! all! Leave the land of Israel! Take her with thee! Everything is within thy grasp. She loves thee—she is willing, I know. The wizard knows all things. What sayest thou? Thou wilt accept the offer of thy friend?"

"Thou knave. No; ten thousand times no! Never will I listen again to any word from thee," excitedly exclaimed the soldier, and he dashed from the room and the presence of the tempter.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE PRISONER.

Prompted by angry excitement that rendered him, for the time, incapable of collected thought, Panthera went out of the dwelling and into the streets where he walked until aware that his rapid strides were attracting attention. The publicity, into which the rescue of Mary had brought him, was extremely distasteful and, noting the curious eyes following his movements, he retraced his steps forthwith, intending to make preparations for immediate departure. To remain longer under obligations to the man whom he now knew to be his uncompromising enemy was not possible, and he keenly realized that to widen the breach, already created, would be the inevitable consequence of another meeting.

On re-entering his apartment Panthera discovered, as he had expected, that Solan Hai was no longer there. The horse, the gift of the bland villian, in the light of recent revelations could not be accepted, and the soldier determined to go away on foot. He had sojourned in these parts long enough, too long for comfort or safety.

He no longer attempted to dismiss from his mind the thought of the Jewish maiden. At no time since the beginning of his acquaintance with her could he have silenced the love that came into life when, as the messenger of Salome, he first beheld the fair Mary in

her father's tent. It had become the ruling cause in the soldier's conduct, and now that there was an assurance, amounting to certainty, of danger to her from the designs of Solan Hai, Panthera considered it his imperative duty to warn her; to protect her from the machinations of the scoundrel, though the method of performing this office might present a problem not easily solved.

The information which he considered vitally important to Mary could not be imparted to her without a chance of involving, or evolving a number of other matters which would be unexplainable without a revelation of his own sentiments.

He could not hope to have inspired in the maiden's breast a feeling akin to his own absorbing passion and to place her under an obligation was not for a moment to be considered.

The expedient of placing his suspicions in writing and conveying them to Joseph came to him; but he recollected that all his information concerning the venerable Jew and his ward had been given by Solan Hai, and the Roman doubted much if the place, indicated as their temporary residence, had ever sheltered them. He would find them, however, and rapidly collecting his few possessions, Panthera decided to start at once, notwithstanding the fact that the day was nearly ended.

Securing his sword and adjusting his shield he stepped to the door; placing his hand on the latch he attempted, carelessly at first, to open it. The latch lifted readily but the door remained fast shut, resisting his most strenuous efforts. Nonplussed and dumbfounded he brought all his strength to bear, still it did not yield. It was securely fastened.

"A prisoner!" he exclaimed, mechanically drawing

his sword. "What can be the meaning of this act of treachery?" he murmured to himself. "It must be another token of thoughtful interest and solicitude coming from my very dear and disinterested friend the wizard."

Panthera smiled grimly as he reasoned to the only conclusion warranted by the circumstances.

The house and its partition walls were built of stone solidly cemented. No means of escape presented itself save through the latticed windows. Panthera recollected that these fronted over the valley. A downward glance convinced him that, owing to their elevation, a leap would be hazardous to life and limb. He was a prisoner, indeed, quite as much so as if the windows had been barred with iron.

As he turned from the sight of the valley, so far below, his ear caught the sound of a grating noise, as of a ponderous body moving heavily. He was astonished to see a section of the huge stones in the opposite wall move and slowly turn outward from the room, a door of solid masonry swinging on stone pivots, producing but slight noise for so weighty a body.

In spite of his efforts to remain cool and collected a feeling of dread took possession of the soldier. A bewildering horror seized him as he beheld the open door exposing a passageway beyond.

Recovering himself he put his back against the wall, resolved to sell his liberty, or his life, at as costly a price as might be in his power. He waited, in an attitude of defense, with drawn sword.

Doubtless an enemy had cut off the means of egress and was now continuing operations in this mysterious manner.

Panthera raised the point of his sword in readiness.

Whoever might enter by this secret way should have cause to remember.

The door swung slowly back, and out of the gloomy passageway a woman came forth. She stood for a moment on the threshold then advanced into the room.

It was Alta, the daughter of Simon Gatzor. She confronted the soldier almost haughtily.

"Put up thy sword!" she said; a trace of scorn discernable in voice and features, as she recognized the motive of Panthera's attitude.

The soldier slowly sheathed the weapon. Although he had been in the same abode for several days, the wondrous beauty of his host's daughter became evident to Panthera for the first time as she uttered the command.

"Put up thy sword!"

As she stood before him he was compelled to acknowledge the power of her splendid presence and queenly bearing, and yet, there was in her self-possession a suggestion of calculating shrewdness that did not advance her in the estimation of the soldier.

Truly she was beautiful—dangerously so, but the cold glitter of her piercing black eyes denoted an exacting disposition and a temper cruel, even vindictive when aroused, strong passion was depicted in the splendidly moulded features.

Panthera intuitively knew she would be either a warm friend or a desperate enemy. Much surprised at seeing her there, the soldier looked searchingly into Alta's face and waited for her to speak again.

"Thou art prepared to leave us?" she asked.

"Quite ready, lady," replied Panthera, "but—"

"I hindered thee," she finished for him, noting his hesitation.

"Then I am thy prisoner?" he questioned, somewhat puzzled.

"For a time, yes. Still thou mayest go. See!" the door that had resisted Panthera's efforts slipped easily open leaving no visible obstacle in the way of escape.

The soldier sprang forward, as if to avail himself of the opportunity to go forth.

"Hold!" cried Alta, intercepting him. "I did but open the door to show thee my will and power to serve thee. Thou did'st offend the wizard?"

"Scarce an hour since," answered Panthera turning from the door.

"I may not explain how, nor why, but I overheard every word. Time must not be wasted. Solan Hai hates thee. Hate with him is the full equivalent of murder. Come with me. In no other way can'st thou hope to escape disaster. Come!" she cried, and as the soldier hesitated, "If not for thine own sake, that thou may'st serve the innocent and helpless."

Alta stepped within the shadow of the dark passage beyond the secret door; and the soldier, accepting the situation, followed his captor into the unknown recess. The scant light died out of the place, as the stone door settled into its frame and Panthera found himself in total darkness. No sound greeted his strained ears but he knew that Alta was close at his side and it was only a moment before he felt the light touch of her hand on his arm. He was gently impelled for a short distance along the unseen path, seeming to gradually descend.

"We are nearing the head of the stairs," whispered Alta, after a brief interval. "Have a care lest thou dash thy foot and fall."

Panthera passively followed his guide in the darkness and, shuffling carefully forward, soon felt the

first step. As they descended he counted the steps and discovered that sixty of them measured the distance between the landing and the floor below, in all probability the foundation of the house. Another passageway, similar to the first, led away from the foot of the stairs. It was a winding way, however, and Panthera soon lost all reckoning of the direction.

In reality they were in a subterranean path tunneled through one of the hills of Judea, for the use of the Israelitish rulers, or their predecessors.

Perfectly familiar with the way, Alta moved forward unerringly until they came into a large cave. Having become accustomed to the darkness Panthera was able to distinguish that the sides of this place had been constructed for security, presenting, as far as he could see no way of escape. This thought was passing through his mind when his companion spoke.

"This was a natural cave," she announced, "from time to time it hath been enlarged since it was cemented and attached to the house of my father. I am one of the few who know the secret of its hidden door. With the knowledge I possess it can be opened by the slightest touch."

"We are among the mountains, are we not?" inquired Panthera.

"You have surmised correctly," answered Alta.

"Let us go hence, I pray thee!" said Panthera anxiously.

Alta seated herself on a boulder.

"Thou must wait until night comes, that it may cover thy movements," she said, quietly. "Curb thine impatience. By this time thine enemy hath discovered thy flight. He hath not forgotten, neither will he forgive." She pointed to a rocky seat of white stone gleaming

vaguely through the semi-darkness. "Content thyself and rest," she continued, "thou shalt depart as soon as it may be prudent. Solan Hai means thee mischief and I am resolved thou shalt have one chance."

Wondering more than ever, yet, feeling the force of Alta's reasoning, Panthera complied with the request, seating himself on the rock.

"Solan Hai is the friend of thy father?" he said interrogatively.

"No! No! He is the demon that overshadows my father's life," cried Alta vehemently. "We were happy until he blackened us with his presence like a dark pall over our home. Taking advantage of my father's inordinate love of money, the wizard hath gained complete control of him, plunging him into misgiving, misanthropy and doubt. Under the blighting, destroying influence of Solan Hai, my dear, indulgent, loving father is no more himself than Michael, the great prince, is like Solan Hai. I cannot described the misery that has entered our home since he became a frequenter of it. He is a monster of deceit and greed, yet, in some way he is connected with our gain in wealth and possessions.

"From being generous, hospitable, considerate and kind to his countrymen and the stranger within his gates; from an affectionate husband and tender parent; from a loyal citizen of the commonwealth of Israel and a worshiper of the only true God, my father hath turned to a creature bereft of reason—except as he imitates or obeys his master—the wizard.

"Under the spell of his controller my father trembles—day and night—his eyes droop, his very life hangs in doubt, there is no assurance of safety from the power of this wretch. In the morning my father prays 'would

God it were evening'; and at evening, he cries out in anguish, 'would God it were morning.' "

Alta's voice, ringing with indignation when she first spoke of Solan Hai, died away in sobs as she concluded and she dashed tears of helpless anger and grief from her eyes.

Whatever may have been Panthera's apprehension for himself, he knew that this outburst of confidence was genuine.

"My friend," he said, "thou hast the sympathy of my soul. I have been informed before of the strange and subtle influence exerted by this man over his countrymen."

"He uses it only for evil!" exclaimed Alta. "Our affections are crushed, my father's spirit is humbled and obscured under the ruinous pressure exerted by Solan Hai. That he is a diviner of thoughts, that he can foretell events and commune with the dead, we no more doubt than we do our existence. And yet—and yet—my father does not—cannot—break away from his destroyer."

"It is passing strange—indeed," murmured Panthera.

"Nazareth, in Galilee, is our native city. We lived there, in moderate circumstances until a short time ago. Then the wizard crossed the path of my father. We came to this place at the behest—yes, command of Solan Hai. We are now increased in goods, rich—in want of nothing. My father is the slave of this man, obeys his slightest wish; stoops to the basest crimes and offenses against his countrymen. But thou," recollecting herself suddenly, "thou art not interested in our sorrows, and I would not have thee think I sought to betray or injure my father."

"I am interested, dear lady," answered Panthera warmly. "I could not doubt thy loyalty to the best interest of thy father. I would cheerfully assist thee. Tell me, is there aught thy poor servant could do to render aid to thee or thine?"

"Alas; no," answered Alta sadly. "I only wonder why I have thus intruded upon thy good nature and made thee listen to my story of deceit and misery."

"Confessions relieve the over-burdened heart," said Panthera, scarcely knowing how to best answer this proud woman, who might resent the very sympathy she seemed to court.

"Hearts break, rather than make them!" she exclaimed passionately. "I pray thee to forget this conversation."

"Thy wishes are commands," replied the soldier, "but—"

"No more," Alta rose to her feet. "Thou would'st find the Jewish maiden, Mary, the daughter of Joachim. Tell me—thou may'st trust me—dost thou love her?"

Through the dim light of the cave Panthera knew that the dark eyes of Alta were striving to read his face. He did not attempt to fathom so deep a thing as the reason for the imperative question, but answered unhesitatingly, without equivocation.

"I do; I love her more than life."

The voice, that had held a charm for Mary when first she listened to its music, grew unspeakably sweet as Panthera made this solemn affirmation.

The woman before him shivered as though with sudden cold. Her firm fingers grasped the hard stone before her as Alta fought for control of herself. The deepening shadows hid from her companion the deathly

pallor that whitened her face, but her voice did not falter as she answered softly.

"It is enough. Alta will be thy friend."

She turned from the soldier, touched a contrivance, and instantly a part of the wall swung inward revealing an aperture sufficiently large to admit of their passing into the open air.

"It is early yet in the night. If thou wilt remain in the cave, thy servant will return to the house, discover if thou art pursued and deliver to thee the information she may be able to gather," said Alta, when they had gained the outside.

"Thou shalt trouble thyself no farther. I know of no words that can express to thee my thankfulness for this deliverance. I fear danger to thee through thy friendship for a stranger. Leave me and return to thy father that thy presence may comfort him."

Panthera extended his hand toward his companion. She did not appear to notice the action.

"Thou would'st have small cause for gratitude did I but guide thee into this wilderness and leave thee," she replied. "Thou art thoughtful, but I fear no danger, care not if it threaten me. Still thou need'st not alarm thyself. I have planned for my own absence. I tell thee I can supply horses and lead thee to the abode of Mary and her kinsman, Joseph. Would such a service be a pleasure to thee?"

"Could I but be assured that harm would not befall thee, nothing would be more acceptable to me," answered Panthera, hope springing anew within him.

"Remain where thou art until I return," commanded Alta, moving quickly toward the cave.

Panthera would have stopped her but she fled into the passage, disappearing instantly from his sight.

From the shelter of the rocks the Roman looked away across the intervening valley to where the lights of the town gleamed through latticed windows. Under the cool, gray summer sky he stood thoughtfully considering the strange adventures of his last few days.

Time grew long to him and a lurking suspicion as to the sincerity of Alta's professed friendship filled his mind with distrust. Was it not more than likely that he had been led here for some foul purpose. The shadow of any rock might be a resting place for one of Solan Hai's bandits. In his inmost heart the soldier believed that the wizard was responsible for the raid at the camp of Joachim and the subsequent horrors. Yet he felt confident of his own strength to resist an enemy, and resolved to wait a reasonable while for the fulfillment of Alta's promise. He found himself growing certain that she would redeem it.

Seating himself near the cave entrance he allowed his mind to dwell on the object most dear to his heart. A flood of tender recollections excluded all thought of danger. He dreamed of the beautiful Jewish maiden; her image filled his mind, leaving no room for ought else, until he was aroused from his reverie by the sound of galloping horses.

CHAPTER XIV.

HABABLI HILLEL.

From the cave entrance Panthera walked forth into the starlight night and the violet atmosphere of the balmy eastern clime caressed his brow as he pushed the heavy curling locks from about his face.

Advancing with swift steps in the direction from whence the sound had proceeded, the soldier beheld Alta, superbly mounted, leading a splendid horse by the bridle-rein.

She guided her horse to where Panthera stood. In a masterful way she relinquished her hold of the extra horse, indicating that the soldier should mount.

"I shall everlastingly be thy debtor," he exclaimed, springing into the saddle.

"Mention it not," she said softly, a tremble breaking through the hitherto firm voice. "The wizard hath discovered thy flight; he is in a towering rage, let us be away, for, I tell thee truly, thou hast no time to waste."

The intrepid woman led the way. Without hesitancy the soldier followed. Alta did not halt or speak. Unaccustomed to self-denial she fought fiercely against the temptation to try if she could not win for herself some expression of interest from this man; she did not even give Panthera opportunity to address her, but, setting her face resolutely forward, she rode at a brisk trot until a modest habitation was reached. Here she paused and allowed her companion to come alongside.

"Thou wilt find the ones thou seekest at this place," said Alta, with a studied carelessness that might have betrayed her secret to one less preoccupied than the soldier.

Since Mary had vanished from his view on the day of her father's death, her rescuer had not beheld the maid. She had never been absent from his thoughts; waking or sleeping he had dwelt in a land of dreams—alone with his love—now that he might be near her, might enter her abode at will, he found himself strangely diffident, felt that his presence in a place, made sacred because it sheltered her, amounted to presumption. To face a desperate foe would have been a matter of comparative indifference and little fear; to come before the woman he loved was an entirely different matter. He glanced helplessly toward Alta.

"I would add to the obligation I am already under and detain thee," he said confusedly. "Thou knowest the peculiarities of the Israelites. In this matter, let me confess, I have become strangely embarrassed."

"Hospitality is one of their characteristics," replied Alta, understanding that Panthera had not considered his excuse for thus disturbing Joseph and his ward. "Fear not, the stranger is never turned from their door. Thou wilt be received with hearty welcome." She leaned forward and for an instant, through the dusk Panthera saw her glowing eyes. "I can serve thee no further," she said, almost wistfully.

With this she tightened the rein, the next moment the soldier was listening to the retreating hoof-beats of Alta's horse. This sound soon ceased and, dismounting, Panthera made his way slowly and thoughtfully toward the house. He kept the bridle rein over his arm, and, with the hilt of his sword, knocked on the lintel.

A light within moved past the window and a woman opened the door. Shading the light with her hand, she peered out into the night.

"Whom dost thou seek?" she inquired, as her gaze met the form of Panthera.

"I would find Joseph and his ward," answered Panthera. "Do they sojourn beneath this roof?"

"Yea," answered the matron, promptly. "Wilt thou enter?" she moved aside as if to let him pass, but, seeing the horse, paused again. "The servant will care for thine animal," she said, and went from the door.

Very soon a man approached from the side pathway leading round the house. He respectfully bowed to Panthera, notwithstanding the darkness. The matron again appeared in the doorway.

"Thou wilt tarry over night with us?" she said inquiringly.

"I bring important information for Joseph. I would be pleased to remain until the morning, did it not trespass too much upon thy hospitality," replied Panthera, as he allowed the man to take the horse away.

The woman led Panthera within a commodious apartment. Saying that she would call her other guests, she passed from the room leaving him to his own thoughts.

Entirely unacquainted with Joseph, remembering the quiet disapproval of manner with which her kinsman had looked on Mary's guileless preference for a stranger, in her hour of grief and bereavement, the soldier found himself unable to frame in his mind a suitable greeting.

This need not have troubled him, for Joseph was above the harboring of malice and when the kindly Jew

at last entered the room he brought with him Mary herself.

The wild-rose face was more pale than its wont and Panthera noticed with quick pity the grieved lines about the tender mouth.

With grave courtesy Joseph acknowledged the salutations of the soldier, but his curiosity as to the cause of the visit was apparent and Panthera plunged at once into the subject.

Keeping back all mention of Solan Hai's scheme for forcibly carrying the maid away, the offer of ships and money, Panthera related so much of the occurrences of the last few days as he deemed sufficient to place them on guard against the designs of Herod.

Joseph and Mary listened with interest and concern to the narrative.

"If what thou dost surmise be true," spoke Joseph, "what would'st thou suggest?"

"I have a friend, who is very near to Herod. We may appeal to him and be assured of wise advice and assistance," replied Panthera.

"Would thy friend be able to protect the child against such powerful odds?" questioned the guardian, in evident consternation.

"If he be not, there is no help short of Rome," was the decided reply.

"Rome!" exclaimed Joseph. Augustus seemed so far off. "The name of thy friend?"

"Hababli Hillel, the elder, a devout man, a man of God, whom all Jerusalem loves, and Herod fears," answered Panthera.

"He is thy friend!" Joseph's surprise was manifest in his voice.

"Hillel is not only the friend of thy poor servant, he

is, also, the friend of all mankind," said Panthera, in proud reverence as he spoke of one who had been his benefactor.

"Thou hast truly spoken," acquiesced Joseph. "The priest is the Moses of his countrymen." He turned to Mary. She had asked no question but her tightly clasped hands spoke of her anxiety and fear. "Thou wilt be safe in the protection of Hillel. He shall know all, my child."

"The seer is now sojourning at his retreat near Bethel," said Panthera. "Could we not repair there on the morrow?"

Mary rose, as if she would have spoken eager approval of the suggestion, but Joseph laid a restraining hand upon her.

"Panthera," he began, "I had thought to find myself ever able to guide and protect this child, committed to my care, but thou art a man full of resources. Thou dost anticipate danger only to avoid and turn it away. Thou hast earned the right to direct our movements. We are most grateful for thy concern in our welfare. Let us depart from this place with the rising of the sun. Daughter of the Lord, thou must retire."

Joseph would have drawn Mary from the room in an endeavor to keep up a reserve, consistent with his own austere training, between the fair maiden under his charge and her soldier champion.

But Mary turned to Panthera, her whole attitude an unconscious confession that frightened Joseph.

"Good-night!" she said, extending her hand to the grasp of Panthera. "Thou hast saved me out of danger and in my trials thou hast brought me blessing. Remember, thou did'st tell me to trust the God of Israel"—the sweet voice faltered and Joseph bowed his

head. "I know the man whom thou hast mentioned," she went on, recovering her composure, "he was the friend of my father. I am deeply grateful to thee for putting it into our hearts to seek his counsel and advice. I will be glad to accompany thee to Bethel."

"And I, also," responded Joseph, looking after the maiden as she went from the room.

Panthera bent low, reverently waiting for the sound of her light footfalls to die away. He raised his eyes and met the direct gaze of Joseph penetrating his very thoughts.

"The maid is fair," said Joseph, as if communing with himself.

"The most lovely I have ever looked upon."

Panthera spoke softly, but his eyes were brilliant, and his face flushed with pleasure.

Joseph grew ashy pale, yet, he conducted the guest to the chamber door and bade him good-night with steady composure.

Anxious solicitude for the future drove sleep from the eyes of Mary's guardian and his night brought no rest. Panthera, too, lay through the long hours alert and dwelling thoughtfully on the future.

The day dawned, perfect as though heaven smiled on the contemplated journey. A full day's travel lay before them. The morning meal was eaten in silence; farewells were said; the prayer for safety uttered; and the little company was well on its way at the rising of the sun.

Another heartbreak awaited Mary on the way, for they must stop at the camp where Joachim had entertained his learned visitors.

They found the servants waiting. The cumbersome equipment had been stored at the home of a friendly

neighbor. The horse of the dead bandit was still held, with scant chance of claim being entered for him from relatives or associates of the former owner.

The loan of an ass for burden bearer and of another horse for the servants was quickly secured and the two men were instructed to proceed, at their leisure, to the home of Joseph at Nazareth in Galilee.

Mary lingered about the deserted camp, the sacred spot of hallowed memories. She grew sad and despondent; in spite of her effort to restrain them the tears stole over her cheeks and she turned from her companions to hide her grief. Without appearing to notice her distress, Panthera hastened their departure. His thoughtfulness did not escape her observation, it was another link in the chain that bound her heart to him.

They traveled the same road Panthera had journeyed over in the night as Salome's messenger, but the darkness had hidden the beauty of the country so that he had no conception of it.

In pleasing contrast to the deep red and yellow soil of the valleys, their shrubs and grasses mingled with patches of variegated flowers, rose the stony hills in ever changing views. Giant trees, their gnarled roots springing from among the stones at the wayside, assisted materially in giving expression to the landscape. Stone houses, with projecting roofs, were built into the hillsides, and, at a distance, appeared to be constructed one above the other. Far over valleys and sloping heights spread large, stone-walled fields and vineyards—all imparting nature's good cheer to the travelers.

They rested for a time near the grave of Rachel, nigh unto Bethlehem, then pushed on leaving Jerusalem to

the east and arriving in the vicinity of their destination shortly before the going down of the sun.

The humble abode of Hababli Hillel was situated a short distance from Bethel, toward Jerusalem. To this place the priest withdrew when in need of rest. He was a man full of years, ripe in experience, and familiar with the ways of men. A room facing the highway afforded him a place for study and the reception of visitors.

Here the great teacher of his time gave audience to those who sought his counsel; here he was at home to any and all. His open, venerable face invited confidence; his learning commanded respect; universal knowledge of his kindly, loving disposition made him the receptacle for the woes of his countrymen. His power was often felt in the defense of the innocent and weak and his ear was ever open to the cry of distress. Having suffered himself, he understood how to succor and sympathize with those who might be called upon to suffer. Men of all nations were welcome and found it pleasant to worship at the same shrine with this remarkable scholar and lover of men.

More than an hundred years had passed since his birth, yet, was he not bent with age, nor was he decrepit in mind. His beard and hair were like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes sparkled with an expression of tender benevolence and interest. His white, priestly robe reached to the ground and was girt about his waist with a linen girdle. His head, hands and feet were uncovered.

Tall and of commanding figure, his skin was clear and clean, the classic features inclined to sharpness, but singularly free from wrinkles for one of so great an age.

He was reputed to be, not only a philosopher and seer, sage and diviner of thoughts and foreteller of events but, also, the greatest, most wonderful, of living teachers.

On the afternoon of the day when Joseph's little party were nearing his abode, Hillel sat in his plainly furnished room, which was void of ornament, but scrupulously clean. Before him, and at his side, tables had been placed. The one before him bore writing materials and rolls of papyrus, on the other were his turban and his tunic.

A bench, worn smooth by continual use, reached around two sides of the room and a few foot-stools completed the conveniences of the apartment. A large latticed window allowed a flood of light to enter.

With light steps a Jewish maiden came to the side of Hillel. She placed on the table a branched candlestick and a tray with snuffers. He did not look up and she waited silently.

"Well, Martha, thou art ever thoughtful. Thank thee child," said Hillel at last, and he glanced fondly at the maiden standing before him, as he roused himself from a reverie.

"Strangers are approaching," Martha announced. "I saw them when I was in the garden but a moment ago; I believe they are coming here for I watched the one in advance as he pointed toward our house."

"How many were there, child?" asked Hillel indulgently.

"Three persons—two men and a woman—they are all mounted and coming this way," she replied.

Hillel took his turban from the table and started across the room.

"Delay the evening meal," he directed. "They may

be hungered and athirst. I will go hence and meet them," and he quitted the apartment.

The travelers had halted at the gate. Lifting his staff from its place near the door Hillel went forward and immediately recognized the foremost of the trio.

"Panthera of the German guard, thou art welcome, my son!" he exclaimed warmly. "And this is Joseph, of Nazareth, if I mistake not."

Joseph clasped the hand of the priest and led him to where Mary modestly waited.

"This is Mary, the child of our kinsman, Joachim. She hath come to seek thy care and protection," spoke the guardian.

"Did her father send her hither?" questioned Hillel.

"Her father is dead," said Joseph sadly. "He sleeps near Hebron."

Hillel lifted his hand in tribute to the grief of the orphan maiden.

"Thou art welcome," he said, "Come my child, Martha will make thee comfortable and at home. She is about thine own age."

Taking Mary gently by the arm he guided her toward the path leading to the house, while Panthera and Joseph followed, after securing the horses.

CHAPTER XV.

THE MIGHTY PRECEPTS.

Martha, grand-daughter of Hillel, was well versed in the art of entertaining. Constantly called upon to minister to the needs of many guests, she had acquired ease and skill in such matters and her winsome ways soon placed Mary at rest.

"I pray thee allow me speech with thee alone," Panthera managed to whisper as he passed close to Hillel on entering the supper room.

The great teacher bent his head affirmatively and the interchange of word and sign escaped the notice of Joseph.

The substantial evening meal was enjoyed by the family of Hillel and his guests. The affections of Mary went out to Martha and between the two young women a friendly sympathy induced mutual confidences. They went away to Martha's own apartment, soon after the meal, leaving the men to discuss the theme uppermost in their minds.

Joseph related the cause of their visit briefly while the seer noted all the details of the narrative closely.

"Then it is your opinion that Solan Hai, with the connivance of the king, will seize the patrimony of Mary?" observed Hillel as Joseph finished.

The latter did not reply, but turned toward Panthera, who answered impulsively.

"There seems to be no room for doubt of his intentions in this respect."

"To my mind there are some important links missing, before I would say 'without a doubt,' " said Hillel. "We know Solan Hai to be without fear or compunction and none too good for such an undertaking. May not this knowledge be the father of our suspicions?"

The philosopher looked thoughtfully at the soldier, who, knowing more than he had told, flushed hotly in spite of himself. Joseph sided with Hillel, seeming actually pleased to turn the matter against Panthera, and replied.

"I fear that I have been too much influenced by the enthusiasm of our friend here, although he has shown much discretion. I have been thinking, as we rode along, that perhaps we have nothing to fear; that our suspicions may be an injustice to the wizard. 'Tis so easy to 'make much of little.' "

Hillel saw the wave of color, that reddened the face of the Roman, remembered the request for private speech and guessed that Joseph knew not all the facts. He thought best not to provoke discussion, at this time, however, and tactfully replied:

"Thou art entirely right, Joseph, we should be slow to think evil and, above all, we should be well advised of all the facts before we enter an adverse judgment against any man. To this thou wilt agree, Panthera?" and he turned his benign look full upon the soldier.

"With all my heart," was the quick reply, "but, I trust thou wilt not doubt my sincerity?"

"By no means," cried Joseph, feeling that he had spoken unkindly and forstalling the priest who would have answered, "but—"

"For the present, trust thy servant," said Panthera,

who had fully regained his composure. "There are some things I may not tell thee, Joseph, but I believe that Solan Hai knows more about the outrage at the camp of Joachim, and the abduction, than he would care to reveal."

"Caution would be wisdom in this matter," said the priest. "For a while, let the young woman remain at this place. Martha will be a sister to her, and we may expect developments, in a short time, that will throw light on the actions and intentions of the wizard."

"Had there been no danger, Salome would not have sent the warning—you may depend upon that," interposed Panthera, somewhat warmly.

"Coupled with the fact that the king is constantly in need of money to support his unnecessary extravagance, and the singularly malevolent influence exerted by the wizard over the king and the people, we may be pardoned if we regard his recent conduct with suspicion. There can be no denying the reliability of Salome. Thou art right Panthera."

The priest delivered this opinion with thoughtful slowness and Joseph did not fail to see the force of it. He readily agreed to the suggestion in regard to the detention of Mary in the seclusion of Hillel's retreat, and intimated that, on the morrow, they would complete arrangements for outwitting the wizard.

Hillel arose at this and conducted Joseph from the room, that he might retire and recover from the fatigue of the day's journey.

With head bowed and anxiety written on every feature Panthera waited for the return of the priest. Hillel lingered silently, at the entrance of the room, studying the attitude of his beloved pupil—for such Panthera

had been—then he moved forward to a place at the side of the soldier.

"Confide in me," he said, fixing his luminous eyes upon the face of his guest. "Keep nothing back I pray thee."

Thus admonished, the soldier recounted his adventures since leaving Jerusalem at the request of Salome, until the arrival at this refuge.

The priest was an attentive listener, not only to the story of the defense of the maid and the struggle for her protection, but to the acknowledgment of the overwhelming, passionate love for the beautiful Mary that possessed the heart of the speaker. Hillel made no remark or interruption, but gave ear with patience and interest to every detail.

"Thou art not mistaken," Hillel said, as Panthera paused. "Solan Hai means mischief to the child. We must protect her. Thou, also, must be circumspect and cautious. For the time being, both thee and she must remain here while I attempt the discovery of the wizard's plans at Jerusalem. Answer me truly, hast thou mentioned thy love to the maiden?"

Panthera looked reproachfully at Hillel.

"Not so much as a whisper," he answered. "Could I do such a thing at such a time?"

"I did not think it of thee, Panthera, for it would not have been the part of an honorable man. Thou must know that our people are exclusive. They do not favor, I may say allow, their sons or daughters to take to themselves husbands, or wives, from among the nations about them. Were her father living, thou could'st never gain his consent to thy marriage with his daughter. Joachim, like thy teacher, was a lineal descendant of the house of David. From this descent

shall come the Messiah." Hillel's voice grew solemn; his features lighted with hope. "Out of Judah shall come the deliverer; the one who will turn ungodliness away from Jacob."

The priest pronounced this prophecy, dear to every Jewish heart, with deliberate emphasis, calculated to impress Panthera with the presumption of his love.

"Thou hast condescended to speak of these things to thy friend and pupil on other occasions," answered Panthera reverently. "Still, may I not hope?"

"Alas," answered Hillel, grieved for the wound he felt compelled to give. "It is impossible that thou should'st ever realize thy hope. The maid, herself, would be too true to her inborn Israelitish faith, to entertain even the thought of love from an alien and a stranger. She must esteem thee highly, and honor thee for the grace of manhood displayed in all thy ways, but, beware, my son, no good hath ever come from such an alliance. It is against the strict injunctions of our law and is invariably punished as a sin. Tempt it not, oh, my friend."

"How can I consider these things!" cried his listener, vehemently. "I have looked into her eyes and seen there the mirror of my own soul—her answer to the yearnings of my own heart. I dare not say that she loves me, yet, there is some subtle influence reaching from soul to soul, that draws us irrevocably together. My arms have held her; in her distress she ran to me and her head rested on my bosom. An hundred little things have told me a story, the sweetness of which I never knew before from woman kind."

Hillel drew closer to the speaker as he thus daringly expressed himself.

"Rash man!" The priest's tone vibrated with pitying

intensity. "I tell thee, it must not be—it cannot be. Let me inform thee of some things which it is right thou should'st know. Joachim was abundantly blessed in all his wordly possessions; the owner of large flocks of sheep and herds of cattle. He had lived, with his wife, at the city of Nazareth, in Galilee, for the space of twenty years, or more, in chastity; in the favor and the esteem of their neighbors. Their lives were plain and right; they were pious and without fault; made large offerings to the officers of the temple, and distributed an abundance of gifts among strangers and persons in poor circumstances, yet, were they childless. Among the people of this nation this condition is considered not only a sore affliction, but a curse as well.

"Year after year they went up to Jerusalem and made offerings in the temple of the Lord. And Anna, the wife of Joachim, grieved bitterly and made this matter the subject of many prayers and much fasting; as did also her husband.

"Now it came to pass at one time, when Issachar was high priest, that Joachim appeared among his neighbors, who had been blessed with children, as was his wont, at the Temple in Jerusalem, and the high-priest, together with these people, joined in heaping reproaches upon the head of Joachim, so that he fled from their presence in grief and shame.

"Then it was, that he and his wife, Anna, vowed, if God would favor them with issue, let it be male or female, they would devote it wholly to the service of the Lord.

"Time passed. The Lord heard their cry, he beheld their trouble and answered their prayer. A child was born unto them and they called her name Mary. When the child was weaned and three years of age, they

brought her to the temple and dedicated her to the service of the Lord, as they had vowed. From her youth up she was nourished in the temple; taught in the holy precepts of the law, and the traditions of her people, until she reached the age of discretion; then Zacharias, the high-priest returned her to her father, that she might find a husband in Israel, from the tribe of Judah.

"Oh, my son!" and the priest stretched his arms toward Panthera. "Thinkest thou Mary will go outside her own people in such a matter? Refrain from this thing, lest thine heart be sore and thy spirit broken from her refusal." Hillel leaned back in his seat as he finished, but continued to gaze beseechingly into the face of the soldier.

A pause—Panthera crossed the room, returned, and stood before Hillel. The solemn warning had affected the devoted Roman deeply; his distress was evident.

"Honored preceptor," he began. "Thou wast kindly generous enough to take the son of a Roman soldier under thy protecting care, to treat him like one of thine own kin; thou did'st educate him in the most beautiful precepts of the law, teaching him, among other things, that the whole duty of man—all men—mark it well—all men—rested on one great commandment: *'Whatsoever thou would'st not that a man should do to thee, do not thou to him.'* Have I remembered correctly?"

"Most certainly, thou hast!" exclaimed Hillel.

"Further"; went on Panthera, excitedly, "be gentle and show meekness to all men; when reviled, not to revile again. Love peace and pursue it. Be kindly affectionate to all men—mark the universality—all men, and thus commend the law of God. Is there any possibility of mistake in this matter? Am I wrong?"

"The Lord be with thee. His blessing be upon thee,

oh, my son! Thou art my true disciple." The tears stole down the face of Hillel as he spoke.

"Rabbi, Father, listen once more," pleaded the eloquent lover. "On a time thou did'st tell thy poor scholar a most beautiful and inspiring story. Its lesson sunk deep into his heart; he hath never forgotten it. May I tell it to thee?"

"My poor child! Could I refuse thee? Go on." The voice of the priest shook with emotion and he stood up opposite his guest.

"Long ago a son of Israel sought a wife." Panthera's tone, musical always, fell upon the hearing of the priest winningly, entreatingly. "Thou wilt remember that he tarried all night near the very spot where thy poor servant is now standing. The sun had gone down, and his heart may have been as sore as mine is this night. He made a pillar of stones and laid him down to sleep.

"In his dreams he beheld a ladder resting on the earth, and the top of it reached unto heaven, and he beheld the angels of God ascending and descending upon it. And behold the Lord stood above it. Tell me, was that a voice from heaven?"

"Truly hast thou spoken," assented the priest.

"Then observe what the heavenly voice said," went on Panthera hurriedly. "'I am the Lord God of Abraham, thy father, and the God of Isaac; the land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed; and thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth; and thou shalt spread abroad to the west and to the east, and to the north and to the south; and in thee and thy seed shall all—mark thine own teaching, oh, my preceptor—shall all the families of the earth be blessed.'"

"Are these promises mine?" demanded the young man of the sage. "What sayest thou?"

"They are, they are," answered the priest with emotion.

"Then am I not afraid!" cried the soldier, exultingly. "This is indeed the house of God—this is 'the gate of heaven' for me. My family is included and embraced in that blessing. The heavenly voice hath been heard by thy servant."

"The Lord of hosts defend thee!" exclaimed the seer as he looked into the enraptured face of his pupil, and saw the drift of his argument.

"Jacob set up a pillar, and made a vow, saying: 'If God will be with me and keep me in this way that I go, give me bread to eat and raiment to put on, I will surely give a tenth of all my increase to the Lord,'" continued Panthera, without noticing the interruption. "A small matter was such a vow, methinks, for one who had already the birthright of his brother, Esau. It was not much to promise, or offer, for the care he asked."

The face of the soldier became transfigured. In the dim light of Hillel's candles a glory of love and sacrifice animated every feature.

"To-night," he said. "I vow before thee, his prophet, that if the Lord will turn the heart of Mary toward me, I will give him all—yes all—I have. My life, my best service. The God of Mary shall be my God; her country, my country; her people shall be my people. On the spot where Jacob, her forefather, built his altar, I shall ask her to be mine. If she will consent; then shall the spot be to me indeed, 'the gate of heaven.' If she answer me no, then shall I go hence with a crushed heart."

CHAPTER XVI.

JERUSALEM.

Surrounded by walls, towers and fortresses, from which, on every side, extended its beautiful gardens, down the valleys and up the opposite hillsides lay the beautiful city of Jerusalem with its mountains, Moriah, Zion, Acra and Bezetha.

Nestling among the flowers, parks, pools and tombs were the mansions of the wealthy, mingling with the tents of the pilgrims, who had selected the delightful, shady, unoccupied spots as locations for their temporary habitations.

The magnificent temple of God, on mount Moriah, was the place, of all the earth, to which the eyes of every son of Abraham turned as the center of all things holy and sacred. Its refulgent brightness reflected the sun's rays from pure whiteness and burnished gold. Every prayer, every aspiration, every hope, expressed, or conceived, by the mind, or the intensity of the Jewish soul, was projected to this one living center. Gifts and offerings flowed into its receptacles in a golden stream. The first fruits of all their possessions were freely donated and dedicated to the maintenance of their time-honored system of religious observances.

This sanctuary of the Lord, this place of divine adoration, enshrined in every Jewish heart, was made dear to their innermost affections by precept, tradition and the holy oracles of God.

On the northwest angle of this mountain, at one time called Zion, stood the famous Baris, a fortress built by John Hyrcanus. It had been strengthened and beautified by Herod and re-named Antonia, in honor of Mark Antony. It occupied, with its offices, magazines, barracks, cisterns and prisons, a large portion of the area of mount Moriah.

The place was garrisoned by Roman soldiers, who were kept in constant readiness to quell riot or disturbance. Its advantageous situation commanded not only the full view of the temple, but the entire Tyropoeon valley lying between mount Moriah and mount Zion.

The two new, and indescribably magnificent residences, comprising the palaces of Herod, were situated on Zion. The walls were surmounted at equal intervals, by enormous towers.

High above the palace, towered the three silent witnesses of the king's defenses, Hippicus, Phasselus and Mariamne; fortresses built of white marble, the latter erected and beautified in the vain hope of quieting the conscience of the king for the murder of the queen whose name it bore.

Each stone in the structures was exactly thirty feet in length, fifteen in breadth, and from seven to eight in thickness; squared and set so exactly as to almost conceal the joining. Each of the towers had the appearance of a single rock, chiseled into form.

The grand summits aloft above David's wall greeted the sight of two travelers, who passed through Gibeah toward Jerusalem. They were mounted and riding toward the city of David—Panthera and his friend, the Jewish philosopher.

Coming to the descent, the two men beheld the city with vastly different emotions. To the priest it repre-

sented the glory of his country. To the Roman, for the first time, it held more than a passing interest. It now represented the nation of the woman he loved. Its strange system of worship; its mysterious rites and ceremonies, had, heretofore, passed as matters which did not even arouse his curiosity—now there was an interest attached to everything that affected, ever so remotely, this strange people.

As the magnificent prospect came into view, the soldier involuntarily exclaimed.

"How grand! How is it that I have never felt this beauty before?"

"Thou hast but just learned to know the beautiful," answered the priest. "'Tis the city of God's promise."

"His promise to all?" asked Panthera.

"Thou hast truly spoken," devoutly replied the priest. "To all mankind. Out of Jerusalem shall go forth the law."

"The city is admirably situated for defense," remarked Panthera, noting the prospect from the soldier's point of view.

"It hath withstood siege upon siege," said Hillel, proudly. "The blood of the Jews hath mingled with every part of its sacred soil. On the north and west is the valley of Kidron, usually called Jehosiphat, where for ages my countrymen have buried their dead. The mountain thou see'st is the mount of Olives. On the other side of the city is the valley of Hinom, which stretches around until it meets the valley of Kidron, and from thence the two form the great trench that extends to the dead sea."

"Nature hath furnished all that could be desired for the site of a city," added the soldier.

"It is built, as thou may'st perceive, on hills divided

by the Tyropœon valley. The Damascus and Jericho ways converge at this point. We will enter at the Damascus gate."

The eyes of Hillel seemed fixed, his gaze never left the lofty turrets before him.

"What are these structures in the rocks?" inquired Panthera as they passed along.

"Tombs of the Kings," replied the priest. "A number of Israel's rulers sleep on Zion's hill and at this place."

As the travelers drew near the city, they fell in with many others, bent on the same journey as themselves. Jews, they were, robed in the flowing garments of the East. Camels and asses, loaded with merchandise, crowded the way. The throng increased as the meeting of the roads was reached.

Coming to a place of entertainment, just outside, the two friends procured care for their animals and entered the city on foot.

A centurion of the Germans had charge of the gate. He came forward quickly on seeing Panthera, with familiar, eager greeting.

"Thou hast been the gossip of the garrison," he cried, glancing at the linen covering on Panthera's head. "Thine helmet! Where is it?"

"Cut in twain," replied Panthera. "By this time rusting on the hills of Judea."

"Get thee within the armory, and fit thyself. The company will be glad to behold thy face," commanded the centurion smilingly.

Panthera turned to his companion; drew him before the officer.

"Thou wilt entertain my friend," he said to the cen-

turion, "he is Hillel the Elder, the famous teacher of the Jews."

The dignity of the officer returned; he bowed respectfully and invited the aged priest to a seat within the gate.

"Thou may'st have some time to wait," he said kindly. "We all love Panthera. His companions will not release him until they hear, from his own lips, the story of his adventures, for the news of them hath preceded him."

"I esteem him for his worth," answered the Seer, looking after Panthera, as he disappeared within an apartment connected with the guard room. "He is a truly great man."

"He is all that," agreed the centurion. "He joined the German company in Greece, when Herod bargained for our services. Should we be called upon to strike a blow, in the King's defense, Panthera will not fail him. He is a brave man and above all, a good one."

"Methinks it requires true bravery to be a good man. Sincerity is the highest mark of bravery." The priest said, gravely.

"Such, sir priest, may be the truth in theory; no doubt it is the thing in words, but—we soldiers measure bravery by the blows that one may be willing and able to strike."

The centurion felt that the priest did not entertain this view, yet, he could not refrain from expressing himself.

"Still, sir soldier, the one who gives himself a willing sacrifice for the good of others, especially if it be for the unthankful, or ignorant, has a harder fight than one who storms a city," said Hillel, gently.

"The soldier questions not the good or ill, to him,

obedience is better than sacrifice. To know orders, and obey them, is the test by which he measures all things," answered the officer.

"Loyalty is a sterling quality," Hillel said, "when attuned to a noble cause, it is honored of God and held in high esteem by man; but, to do and dare, without reason, is like the blind devotee, who sacrifices all to appease his offended deity, or, who spends his life in slavish adoration to satisfy his cupidity, through hope of what he may in turn receive."

"And yet," sharply interposed the officer, "the two motives you mention, seem to be the highest law of all religions."

"Not so, my son," quickly retorted the priest, "the highest law of all religions is exemplified in the love we have for one another."

"And for all men," said another voice.

Panthera had separated himself from his comrades, and, coming hastily back to where he had left the priest, overheard the last words.

"The highest, the best, the noblest conception of God, is that of a father. The best service, one may render such a God, is the recognition of all men as his children—as members of one common family." Panthera's word seemed living—real, as his glowing face attested his belief in the utterance.

"Thou art right, my countryman!" exclaimed the centurion, in animated approval.

"May the Lord set his seal to what thou hast said, mine excellent Panthera," added the priest. He rose as he spoke. "We bid thee God speed, good soldier," and the priest turned to depart.

"Fare thee well," added Panthera.

"Thou art fortunate in thy leave. Three months is

a long time to play the patrician, at the king's expense," remarked the officer, as Panthera was about to accompany the priest.

A look of surprise swept over the face of the soldier, but he did not vouchsafe an answer. The two moved some distance away; then Panthera did no longer restrain his pleasure at the knowledge imparted by the centurion.

"The king hath granted me a long leave of absence," he observed. "The centurion hath just informed me that it extends over the space of three months."

Hillel appeared to be mystified.

"I do not understand thee," he said, "did'st thou go away without permission?"

"Not exactly," said Panthera, smiling, "but hastily. The sister of the king assured me that she would take care of the matter of my leave. It seems she hath done so. I expected a few days, but months—that is more than I had dared to hope for."

Hillel was pleased at this mark of favor to his scholar.

"Alexes, the husband of Salome, hath the control of such matters, and this may account for the time granted. At all events, the arrangement will afford time in the matter before thee. I know of a friend, whom we may trust, and who may have information of what we desire to know."

After thus expressing himself Hillel led the way rapidly south through the Tyropœon valley, until they came to a street, paralleled with the bridge connecting mount Moriah and mount Zion. Entering this street, they turned to the left toward the prison of Antonia. The priest was frequently recognized, and, as he passed

was saluted with the friendly greetings customary among the Jews.

"The Lord be with thee, Rabbi!"

"His peace be thine my son."

Panthera was much impressed as this evidence of loving friendship was constantly repeated. Hillel seemed to have a faculty of remembering every little detail, of pleasure or pain, affecting the people who looked to him for advice and comfort. The remarkable man paused often to speak to those with whom he was on intimate terms and the two made slow progress when the Jews realized that their beloved priest was among them.

The busy hum and rattle of business, the incessant clatter, the shuffle of sandaled feet, scurrying along the stone streets, proved interesting in the extreme to the soldier. The hoarse cries of the perambulating merchant, the ever recurring invitations of the various traders as they drove bargains with their customers and bade all inspect the goods exposed for sale in the bazaars and booths that filled the Cheesemonger's valley.

This portion of the city was irregularly laid out, but the priest was thoroughly familiar with the surroundings, and threaded his way through the narrow streets that, to a stranger, would have seemed too intricate for the unaccustomed visitor to travel. The houses seemed to have been thrown into their places in dire confusion, and some of the thoroughfares, dignified by the name of streets, afforded barely room for the movement of the crowd.

As they met other persons, the soldier was often obliged to drop a pace behind Hillel. At times it appeared that they were walking through the corridors

of an immense prison, so closely did the gray walls press together. No openings had these walls save those so far above the street as to make looking within impossible; the only evidence of life being an occasional glimpse of a face beyond a lattice. Some of the buildings on opposite sides of the streets, were connected by arches creating an additional impression of a prison, or vaulted cellar, as they walked where the sunlight was completely excluded.

At length, beneath the shadow of mount Moriah, they reached an inner court abutting on the street from which they turned.

"This is the end of our journey, for the present," said the priest.

As one at home he entered the enclosure, followed by the Roman, whose cause had enlisted the sympathy of the wisest man among the Jews.

CHAPTER XVII.

A SEAT OF LEARNING.

The place, wherein they had entered, was the courtyard of a Jewish seat of learning. Many young men, all of the pronounced Jewish type, strolled about the enclosure; others were seated, and groups gathered in different parts of the stone paved space. That they were discussing subjects of much interest, was evident from the close attention and animated gestures. Occasionally a voice broke into song, or hummed a Jewish melody, but they indulged in very little of mirth.

The entrance of the priest, Hillel, was not noticed until he stood in the midst of the students; then the crowd surged toward him, where he paused, in the middle of the court, pleasure and welcome depicted on every countenance. They fell back slightly, as Panthera's glittering uniform and soldierly figure met their gaze, waiting for explanation from the Roman, or their priest, for what might be an intrusion.

Hillel observed this instantly, and hastened to make the proper introductions to place his friend at ease.

"Young men," he said, addressing those nearest to him in a tone sufficiently loud for the rest to hear. "Behold the friend of Hillel. I beseech, for him, your courtesy and hospitality," and the priest stepped aside, leaving Panthera the center of attraction.

"The friend of Rabbi Hillel is welcome!" ejaculated a chorus of voices.

"Is thy teacher, Judas, son of Sanphæus, within?" inquired the priest.

"He is, Rabbi!" exclaimed several eager voices, and one of the students hurried forward. "Would'st thou speak with him?"

"Aye, that I would," answered Hillel. "Hasten thou, inform him that Hillel waits his pleasure."

The young man went swiftly across the court and disappeared into the house beyond. The priest seated himself on one of the number of convenient benches and motioned the soldier to a place at his side.

The assembly of young men seemed to take it for granted that the two new comers were absorbed in private consultation, and they spoke in subdued tones; gradually wandering to a distance from the pair, leaving them to their own topics.

Panthera had time to notice some of the peculiarities of the place. The court was enclosed, on three sides, by the walls of the school building. The structure was not as high as most of the other buildings in the vicinity, being but two stories. The large windows were covered with lattice work, and could be closed from the inside by shutters. Light awnings shaded them, excluding, entirely, the heat of the sun. The narrow side doors, set deep on the inside of the walls, suggested the entrances of cells.

Above, and on a level with the second story, a massive balcony extended the whole length of each side. Access was gained to this place by stone steps at each end leading from the court, or from the second story windows. Twelve marble steps across the entire front of the building led to a broad platform, and, from this, a lofty arched doorway led to the interior.

Age had set its seal upon the structure, robbing it of

much of its original beauty; the footprints of generations had left their impress on the stairs and pavement; the seats, too, were worn into hollows through constant use. Time had discolored the material entering into the construction of the building, and given it a dull, gray appearance, save where the facings and steps kept their original whiteness through care and daily use. A bulky reservoir in the center of the court received the rainwater from the flat roof through troughs and pipes arranged for the purpose.

While his messenger was absent, Hillel explained to his companion that many of the most prominent Jewish families placed their sons in this institution for instruction in the law and history of their nation. The most liberal of the Jewish sects, that known as the Essenes, being in control of the establishment.

The Teacher, Judas, lost no time in returning the messenger to the priest, begging that his illustrious friend, Hillel, would come at once to the reception room.

The Elder Hillel and his friend followed the messenger across the court, up the stone steps, through the central portico, and, from an ante-room, into a spacious chamber used for school purposes, but unoccupied at this time. From this room they went into a hall, leading still farther into the interior. Traversing the length of this they stopped before a door at the left. A voice from within bade them enter.

Pushing the door inward, the attendant held it until the Rabbi and his companion had passed into the presence of the occupant of the room, then he drew it softly shut, and left the Teacher alone with his guests.

Hillel went forward; Judas arose. The two men met and laid their cheeks together for a moment. Then

Judas placed his right hand upon the shoulder of the priest.

"I greet thee, my brother," he said. "What can I do to be of service to thee?"

The speaker was a man of middle age, with piercing eyes, and hair and beard of jet black. He was tall and splendidly muscular, especially inviting was the cordial frankness in his manner. He glanced beyond the priest to the soldier, and Hillel, placing his arm within that of the Roman, introduced him thus:

"I present to thee a worthy friend and companion, Caius Panthera, a Roman soldier; a student who hath learned at the feet of thy servant; not only an apt pupil, but a lover of truth, as was his father, of esteemed memory, before him."

"Thou hast given the best commend to our regard," said Judas. "Thou art welcome Panthera. Let us be seated."

The three men gathered round a table, near the center of the room. Hillel opened the conversation.

"Our friend, here, hath espoused the cause of one of our fairest countrywoman," he began. "Hast thou knowledge of the death of Joachim of Nazareth?"

"Alas, yes, and we knew of it only to grieve for his loss. A number of our students were under his care and patronage, and they mourn with us, and also, for the affliction and trouble following his daughter, the beautiful Mary."

"You refer to the abduction?" inquired Hillel.

"No—we heard of that matter, but had understood that she was restored the same day to her friends." The speaker paused, and looked with new interest at the soldier.

"Thou hast been correctly informed," said Hillel,

with a fond glance toward the Roman. "This brave and noble soldier was fortunately near, and he rendered timely aid and assistance. The maid, thanks to his brave interference, was rescued on the same day."

"'Tis not this, to which I refer," said Judas, "perhaps thou hast not heard what followed the death of our countryman," and his features took on a troubled expression.

"Our friend hath reason to anticipate misfortune for the daughter of Joachim," answered Hillel. "I pray thee, tell us what thou may'st know of this matter."

"Confiscation often follows death, at Jerusalem," said Judas, meaningly.

"Then our surmises are verified," exclaimed Hillel. "We may expect the worst to follow."

"Indeed we may, of a truth," replied Judas, sadly. "In a short time the wealth of Joachim will be transferred to the coffers of Herod."

"But—Cæsar lives!" cried the soldier, no longer able to restrain his indignation. "We will appeal to Augustus and the Senate. Such things cannot pass the Roman tribunal."

"Alas, my friend, 'tis plain to be seen thou art not a Jew. Herod hath some mysterious means of reaching the ear of Augustus, and turning such matters in his own favor. Moreover it is exceedingly dangerous to interfere in the monstrous and unnatural undertakings of this king. Whatever may be accomplished for the assistance of the child must be approached with care and circumspection. No relation known, is too sacred to enter into the plots of this man, styled 'king of the Jews' for the gaining of the ends he hath in view."

"Yet we will not passively consent to the outrage!" cried Panthera, in warm appeal.

"Thou hast well spoken," was the reply of Judas. "But, our dead countryman committed a grave offense. In his youthful days, he pursued the peaceful vocation of the shepherd. In later years, he entered the marts of trade and quickly amassed large wealth—this hath touched the heart of Herod, in the tenderest spot." The lips of the speaker curled disdainfully and his expression showed his sarcastic intent.

"We will miss the thoughtful provision of Joachim," he continued, "whatever thou may'st undertake, for the protection of his daughter, thou can'st be assured of the heartiest co-operation of every individual connected with this institution."

"I thank thee," said Panthera, seeming to assume the burden of protecting the cause of Mary. "Hast thou means of knowing what is occurring in Jerusalem, in reference to the matter in question?"

"The students feel the sword, that is over us all," answered Judas. "They are quick to notice things of this character, which affect the homes of their kindred or acquaintances."

"Tell us all thou hast learned," persisted Panthera.

"The day after the death of Joachim, a renegade Jew, Costa, the son of Ammal, who resides hard by Bethel, proclaimed in the market place, before the palace of the high priest, and at the door of the temple; that the death was a visitation of God; that Joachim was stricken down, while engaged with certain others, in an attempt to overthrow the throne of Herod. He declared that the conspiracy was crushed in its incipency, by the removal of the leader, through the interposition of the Almighty. He promised that, in a few days, witnesses, from Hebron, and its vicinity, would be forthcoming at Jerusalem, who would establish these

facts. The rabble shouted in honor of the king, who, in the meantime, and that justice might be administered without delay, set his seal on the possessions of the dead patriarch, whether they were in Jerusalem or Judea—until a further hearing of this matter could be had. Soldiers of the king are now in charge of both the residence of the deceased and his places of business."

The Teacher delivered this concise explanation with apparent disbelief in its truth and waited for the further questions of the soldier.

"When will the king hear this matter?" asked Panthera.

"On the morrow," said Judas. "At the ninth hour it is set for hearing. Proclamation hath been made throughout the city."

"Who are the accusers, if thou knowest?" Hillel asked.

"One Solan, whose surname is Hai, a reputed sorcerer and diviner. He it is who may be expected to furnish proof of the charges. A number of other witnesses, beside this Costa, are mentioned. Most prominent among them are Simon Gatzor, of Hebron, and his daughter, Alta. There are others from Jerusalem, all of whom are of evil repute, known as persons who furnish false testimony to suit the humor or purposes of the tyrant, who manipulates these matters through the wizard, as this Solan Hai is called."

Panthera's face had grown gray as he realized the desperate situation that menaced the maiden, Mary.

"We will attend this hearing, trial, farce, or whatever it may be styled," he remarked—steady determination hardening his features into a look of uncompromising sternness. "Our testimony would throw light upon

the occurrences at the death of the most worthy nobleman, Joachim; more than that, Joseph and the servants should be present, and, if need be, the young woman, herself."

"Thou knowest but little of Jerusalem," said Judas, kindly. "Do not delude thyself with the supposition that justice is the object of this hearing. It would fare ill with thee, did'st thou dare to attempt the giving of testimony that might thwart the design of the king."

"I shall be there," said Panthera, "and I shall be heard."

"Witnesses for the defense carry their lives in their hands, young sir," replied the Teacher. "Thy servant shall not let or hinder thy purpose. Be warned, however, think well and have a care before thou carry out thine undertaking. The prison, on the hillside above us, knows many acts of treachery in the name of country, government and God. On a level with where we are seated, and still lower in the mountain's depth, from which escape, or release, hath never been known, languish many who dared cross the purposes of the king.

"There can be no controversy with those who are condemned to pass their lives in Antonia. The objector can no longer annoy the king; every name is forgotten; the identity of every prisoner—lost. They are swallowed up as though in the embrace of death; nor, can the despairing cry of the doomed ones reach the ear of any who might be disposed to respond to their misery with sympathy or help. The summons comes like a 'thief in the night'; the loved ones may plead at the gate of Antonia; they will only obtain evasive replies to their frantic appeals. Once those doors close upon the form of the entering wretch, they are sealed. We, miserable sons of Abraham, have ever before us these

lessons of mystery and death. Fear and trembling have seized us; so that morning, noon and night, we have no rest. Neither we, nor our children."

Judas sprang to his feet, paced up and down the room and, at last, paused before the two visitors, once more expressing himself with energy:

"To-morrow, my friends, those dear young men whom you observed in the court below—students, philosophers; the children of fond and loving fathers; the strength and support of the mothers of Israel; the hope of the race—of the world—will demand justice for the memory of their dead patron, and for his defenseless child. They will not be heard. On the contrary, a tag will be affixed upon the most forward—a mark for slaughter. They know the risk, yet, think'st thou they shrink from it? No! they have already prepared with alacrity, and accepted the opportunity of defying our tyrant, with pleasure. They will ring their challenge, for mercy and justice, in his dull ears, but—it will be in vain!"

Judas sank into a chair and buried his face in his hands.

"Then I shall be with them!" declared Panthera earnestly. "Their cause is mine. Their sorrow I will share, it is mine also, from our common cause."

The teacher shook his head.

"Then shalt thou be branded as a traitor, a rebel, a spy; a consorter with evil-doers; an encourager of riot and confusion; an enemy of the king, in whose pay thou art. Shame will be heaped upon thy good name, and it will follow thee, until it shall end in death."

"So be it! I accept the alternative. Rather than fail in what I know to be my duty. If need be, I shall die a true man—true to humanity; true to right."

"Heaven's care be thine, my son, and turn all evil from thee!" exclaimed Hillel, devoutly.

He had watched the intense energy of Panthera, and the ardent face of his brother priest, as the latter endeavored to convince the soldier that danger threatened those who baffled Herod. He knew the fearless disposition of his pupil; knew that nothing could restrain him from the execution of his decision.

Judas did not notice the ejaculation of Hillel, but, placing himself opposite Panthera he fixed his eyes, smoldering with indignation and resentment, upon the intrepid young man and exclaimed:

"Let me tell thee a story."

CHAPTER XVIII.

A STORY OF REVENGE.

"Last year, late in a winter's night, a man came to my door. When I demanded his name he beseeched me for admittance, as an act of mercy. I opened the door and beheld a soldier who was in the pay of Herod. He divined my intention of refusing him entrance and pressed his way into the room.

" 'I am an Israelite, of the tribe of Benjamin. For the sake of our people, let me speak with thee.'

"I closed the door and motioned the soldier to a seat, which he declined and entered, at once, upon his mission.

" 'I come to implore your assistance, your ministration of sympathy, for a dying man. A Jew, who will be dead before the rising of the sun. He must see a priest, an elder, some one who will assist him in his distress. His conscience troubles him, and I cannot bear to look upon his pale face and refuse his pleading. Wilt thou visit him?' I could not doubt the sincerity of the soldier, still, I hesitated to comply with his request.

" 'I am not a priest. I am a teacher,' I replied.

" 'The man desires to unburden his mind; something is tormenting him. He will never know the difference between priest and teacher. For the love of God, hasten!'

"I was so impressed by the earnestness of the man

that I consented. In a few moments we were in the street and hurrying toward the place where the man, for whom I was to become confessor, was confined. We arrived, without let or hindrance. My companion left me at the door.

“‘Knock!’ he said. ‘Thou wilt be admitted.’”

“At this moment, another soldier, one of Herod’s guards, passed slowly before the place. Then I knew, of a certainty, that something unusual was taking place. But I was not prepared for the painful experience through which the visit compelled me to pass, and I devoutly hope that I may never again be called upon to figure in such a capacity. My companion joined the guard, whispered to him, and the two went away together, leaving me alone.

“A deathlike silence reigned about the habitation. I stood for a moment, at the top of the stone steps, which I had ascended at the side of the soldier guide, then turned and knocked at the door. It opened at once and I beheld an old man, his bent form trembling in the reflection of the lamp held above his head. His wrinkled face seemed withered, like parchment. He thrust his claw-like hand through the opening and clutched my shoulder.

“‘Thou art alone?’ he whispered, hoarsely.

“‘I am,’ I assured him.

“He almost pulled me within the room, and, quickly closing the door, shot the bolt into place.

“‘Follow me, be not afraid!’ he exclaimed, perceiving in my looks the fear that had taken possession of me.

“The man was a most uncouth object; a frail, ghost-like creature; shuffling along with quick cat-like movements. I could not help associating him with a wild

animal from the cadaverous look of his gray complexion, the unkempt hair, hanging over his shoulders, and the grizzled beard. His few teeth were broken and discolored. To these indications of extreme age, was added a voice of gasping, rasping hoarseness, akin to the bark of a snarling dog, or the whining cry of a wild beast. He was the most repulsive specimen of humanity I had ever beheld.

“‘Do not turn back,’ he implored, in a nasal wheeze, ‘Thou may’st thyself need a friend.’”

“Thus appealed to, I could not refuse to see the matter to the end. Still holding the light above his head, he led the way down a long narrow hall. Dark shadows enclosed us on every side, seeming to be deepened by the faint rays from the lamp.

“At length he stopped before a door, and held it open for me to pass through. Stepping into the room, I discovered that, with the exception of a table and one chair, it was without furniture. I felt as though I had entered a vault, possibly a tomb. The man had pushed the door shut, and, I felt assured that he had taken the precaution to slip the bolt into place. I could not suppress my misgivings. I had been most imprudent to listen to the importunities of the soldier. I was surprised to see, in a corner of the small apartment, a bath tub full of steaming water. From this my eyes came back to the face of the man, in whose power I now felt myself to be.

“‘Do not stand staring at me! We are alone. Thou art strong and able. Why should’st thou fear a poor old man? Seat thyself!’”

“He pointed to the only chair. I intimated that I would prefer to stand, and offered him the seat.

“‘No!’ he cried sharply. ‘Thou must not hurry. Thou wilt listen to my story?’

“He placed the lamp on the table and seated himself on the outer edge of the bath tub, leaving me to stand or accept the proffered chair, as I might choose.

“The steam curled about the head of the man, its moisture dampened his disordered hair. His misery was so palpable that, of a sudden, pity came to me. I no longer feared for my own safety, but drew the chair nearer the wretch and asked him why he had sent for me. He did not reply at once and I resumed.

“‘I was given to understand, that a—’

“‘That a man was dying!’ he exclaimed, snatching the words from me. ‘Thou wast informed truly—I am,’ he paused, wrung his skeleton hands, and finished, ‘a—dead—man.’

“‘I thought I understood now. I was in the company of a madman, one possessed, and again I looked at him measuring my strength against his.

“‘Before the rising of the sun,’ he proceeded. ‘I shall be carried to Abraham’s bosom, or to hell—to hell.’ He sprang to his feet, throwing his arms over his head in terrible gesticulations.

“‘I resolved to know what actuated this unfortunate creature before me. I did not allow myself to rise or appear alarmed, but begged him to calm himself and tell me all; encouraged him to unburden his mind to me; promised him my best offices in his distress. This had the effect of quieting him, and he resumed his place on the edge of the tub.

“‘Tell me, of a truth, art thou a friend of Herod?’ he whispered, craning his head forward.

“‘I did not wish to acknowledge so questionable a relation, and answered him guardedly:

“‘I am a Jew.’

“‘Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!’ he laughed wildly. The unseemly mirth echoing through the bare room. ‘Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!’ My reply seemed to have given him intense satisfaction.

“‘A Jew!’ he said explosively. ‘That’s good. I was a Jew myself—mark it. I was a Jew once—myself. Perhaps thou wilt not believe it when thou hast heard all my horrid story.’

“‘I will not cease to be a brother, I could not. Whatever thine offenses may have been,’ I told him.

“‘Nor crimes?’ he asked, hungrily.

“‘No. No crime can change the fact that the Lord of mercy hath made us all of one blood.’

“He seemed to take heart as I thus encouraged him, looked more hopefully into my face and told me his awful story.”

Judas had related this statement rapidly. He seemed fairly excited at the prospect of interference, by the soldier in the plans of Herod. He had not been able to control the gathering of enthusiastic young students, who had appeared before him, and made their avowal to go before the king, in defense of their dead patron, and the rights of his young daughter. It did not appear that he would now be able to convince Panthera of either the danger that would attend his appearance at the trial, or of its uselessness.

“The man, of whom I speak, was Dan Petros, a jailor, at the prison Antonia. I would that thou should’st know of its hidden horrors.”

Judas rose and went to a cabinet at the other side of the room. Hillel and Panthera waited silently, somewhat awed by the vehemence of their host.

“I know of no better way to bring these horrors to

thine understanding, than by the reading of what is written here," said the Teacher, returning to his seat, and spreading a thick roll on the table before him.

"The confession, made me by this man, who only waited for the relief of an unburdened mind before entering the bath and opening his veins, did so prey upon my mind that at last, in the hope of ridding myself of the constantly recurring scene and its one frightful actor, I wrote his narrative of exquisite torture and with thy permission I will read it to thee."

Panthera murmured his appreciation of the interest evinced in the welfare of a stranger, but Hillel only settled himself more easily in his place, and waited.

Judas glanced toward his auditors; saw that their attention was given, and at once began to read:

THE STORY OF A DOOMED MAN.

"It is twenty and one years, on the morrow, since I, Dan Petros, entered the service of the king. I was then forty years of age. Born of humble parents, at Joppa, on the sea, I was raised strictly of the sect known as Pharisees. My father and mother were devout believers in the law of Moses, and loved the hope of the future life that is reserved for the faithful. In this belief was I instructed, after the manner of Israelites, in such matters. Death is approaching; I dare not pass into the presence of my God without some preparation, some atonement.

"Living, all the days of my youth, by the sea, I had learned the calling of a tent and sail-maker. This knowledge served me well in hand and I was enabled to take to myself a wife. She was an alien to the commonwealth of Israel, being a Greek woman. She was beautiful to look upon, and I loved her so that I anticipated her

every wish, humored her every whim. She was the light of mine eyes, the comfort of my heart and the idol that I worshiped.

“For five years we lived at Joppa and were happy, so happy. I shall never forget the dream of bliss that was mine, the memory of it will haunt me beyond the grave, to which I go before another day-dawn. In an evil hour we moved to Jerusalem. I had no trouble in obtaining employment there and, for a while, we were still happy.

“At last the destroyer came; a courtly man, of her own race, crossed her path. In some way, I never knew or cared how, they became acquainted. I was twenty years older than she—my wife, my wife. He was young, strong, beautiful. He looked like a God; so dangerously handsome was his Greek face, that I dreaded, I knew not what, when first I beheld him. His supple form might have been copied in marble for a statue of ‘Perfection.’

“I came home one day, to the place that I had slaved to make comfortable for her, and found this man holding the wife of my choice, the woman of my tenderest affection, close to his traiterous heart.

“I knew the guilt of the pair, I sprang upon them and endeavored to fell him to the floor. He seized me in his powerful grasp, and I was helpless, as though held in a vise. Then he spoke to her, in his accursed tongue, and she fled from us. When she was beyond my reach, he threw me into the corner of the room as though I had been a bundle of feathers. He went out of the room laughing, but he pulled the door carefully shut and, in some way, fastened it on the outside. I have forgotten how this was accomplished, but it served to confine me

until he was safely away, and as I well knew, in the company of my false love.

"I obtained my freedom as speedily as possible, and, for several days after, I tramped through the streets of Jerusalem in vain search for the fugitives, until I became exhausted from exposure and hunger. I remember falling on the doorstep of a large building, and my next recollection is of being in a sort of hospital ward, where soldiers ministered to me.

"For weeks I lay there hovering between life and death, keeping to myself the secret of my wanderings and the cause. At last I was able to leave my bed. I discovered that I had been cared for, nursed back to life, within the fortress of Antonia.

"When I recovered, I felt a desire to bury myself in the oblivion of the prison, that I might be removed from the sight of man. In some way my wish became known to the powers, and I was ordered to appear before the king. A guard of soldiers conducted me across the bridge to the palace, ushered me into his presence and I was left alone with Herod. I had seen him before, on the streets, and at a distance, but now I could touch the hem of his garment, and I fell prostrate before his majesty.

"He commanded me to rise and I stood before him in awe and reverence. He, in turn gazed into my face, and, although my eyes were cast downward, I knew that he was closely scrutinizing my countenance and person.

" 'The king is informed that thou would'st remain in the fortress,' Herod said, in a stern voice—measuring the appearance of his intended instrument with critical eyes.

" 'Most true, oh, king,' I answered.

“ ‘Would’st thou enter my service, as keeper of the dungeons?’

“I heard this question with almost incredulous satisfaction. I to be granted respite from contact with the outer world! I replied in eager acceptance:

“ ‘Aye, oh, king! I have been deceived and betrayed by the woman I loved and trusted. I would hide myself and bury my mortification and shame.’

“The ‘King of the Jews’ took a step toward me.

“ ‘Why not have revenge?’ he hissed the words into my very ear. I dared to raise my eyes, for I felt that his penetrating glance read the longing of my soul. A new sensation thrilled my body and sent my blood pulsing madly.

“The king watched the clutching of my hands; the twitching of my face, and he knew that, in imagination, I held the hated rival in my grasp; that I was looking into the eyes of my wife with furious hatred; that I could see her; see him.

“I forgot the presence of the king. I saw the guilty lovers in my power. In imagination I wound a mighty net, from which there was no escape, around each of them; listened to their cries, as they moaned and begged for mercy. Great drops of sweat oozed from every pore of my body; my muscles became tense and hard; my face was set, and I knew it was livid with the hue of death. The eyes of the king were fixed upon me all this time. I must have become frenzied. His body seemed to recede from me. All that remained was the sight of his burning, glaring eyes. A strange, horrid influence seized me, as though I were possessed of the spirit and power of Herod himself. I felt that he was still before me, but my narrowed vision saw only the awful staring gaze—again he hissed:

“‘Revenge! Let revenge dominate thy soul! Let hate be thine only ambition—thy chief virtue! Let torture be thy pastime and diversion. Slave, look into my face, take the thought from thy master—thy king!’

“I felt as if a terrible blow struck upon my head. I fell to the floor.

“‘Arise!’ I heard the voice command.

“I lifted myself. Strange to say my senses returned forthwith, and I experienced a refreshing feeling. I looked into the face of my king, my master, and I loved him. I was intoxicated by his forceful power that gave me a mighty strengthening as it emanated from his body to my nervously prostrated system. I was glad to be his slave; to worship at his shrine; to behold in him my god. He called me by name, and it made sweeter music to my ears than when it fell from the lips of my mother.

“‘Dan Petros, tentmaker of Joppa, receive the command of thy master. Henceforth thou shalt be the keeper of the dungeons of Antonia. Thou shalt be Herod’s friend, which friendship shall be balanced by thy loyalty. When thou hast served thy master well, then shalt thou be rewarded. Thou shalt admit to the prison thy false wife and her lover.’

‘Oh, king!’ I knelt before him. ‘Behold thy slave. Life, soul and body are freely given to thy service. Henceforth thy poor servant shall live only in the shadow of his master.’

“Thus was the compact made. I became the keeper of Castle Antonia and entered upon my duties immediately.

“The man who had preceded me, was thoroughly conversant with the place and had grown old in the service. He had kept a complete record of the inmates,

besides a history of the happenings during his term of office. He had no intimation of being superseded until an officer of the king's guard introduced me as his successor.

"He was informed in the shortest, most tense terms, that an order from the king required him to deliver up the keys, authority and property, in his hands and under his control and care, to his successor; that he was to remain and teach the new incumbent all things necessary that might in any way be pertaining to the office, until he should be dismissed, be that time long or short.

"I was an apt pupil. Each corridor, each dungeon, every step leading from one to the other; all the dark, damp, slimy recesses of the horrible place were laid bare for my inspection. The use of the implements of discipline and torture was explained to me in a cold business-like way that revealed the callous heart of my informant. He made me shudder, as horror after horror, cruelty after cruelty was exposed. He must have acquired his relentless disposition from long contact with the terrors of his position.

"In the beginning, I kept my expressions, of disgust and fear, to myself with the greatest effort, as I learned the secrets of this God-forsaken institution. Every time these feelings of weakening came to me, the form of my wife and her paramour came with frightful vividness before me, so that I clutched at the air with almost a hope of reaching one or the other of them.

"I was introduced to each inmate as the new master, informed that names were strictly prohibited. My tutor intimated that it was wisest to forget that such things had ever belonged to these wretches. He gave me the record of each prisoner, according to number.

"Age and youth suffered alike in these dismal dun-

geons; persons of both sexes; the ignorant and the cultured; the strong and the weak, looked into my face, striving to read there some hope of pity. Some of the cells contained two persons but never more than three, while solitary confinement was the rule. Thick walls separated the sufferers from their nearest companions in misery. The coarsest kind of food was furnished, and the supply of water was actually unfit for use.

"My instruction lasted for a month, or more, I mastered every detail. The soldiers recognized me as governor of the castle prison department, and paid me due respect and reverence. I accepted the dignity of my new surroundings, and it seemed as natural to me as if I had been a jailor and inquisitor born.

"During this time I visited the king on a number of occasions. We met alone always. Each interview seemed to rivet the chains that bound me to this man. I learned to worship and deify him. Every time he turned his eyes upon me, I found a desire to run and fall at his feet to cry out his praises.

" 'Great is Herod! "King of the Jews!" '

"In the meantime I received my orders from him face to face. He treated me more as a companion than as a servant. I discovered that trickery, duplicity and murder were the requirements that might be expected of me; that they constituted the stock in trade of the hirelings in the service of my idol. This did not deter me nor did the warnings of my predecessor.

"The time came when I considered myself equipped to take full charge.

"My master had intimated to me that it would be a matter of safety to him should the old keeper find a way to heaven. The few weeks of contact with the workings of the prison had so changed me, that I, at

once, set about the finding of means for the accomplishment of his murder. I did not delay the matter, but, on that very day made excuse for him to go with me into the very lowest dungeons. I had resolved to push him over the corridor wall, into the water below, and drown him, when a still more diabolical means for making way with him presented itself.

"We came to four cells, more like niches, cut into the solid rock. I did not remember to have seen them before, as the doors were of stone and when closed gave the appearance of a bare wall. How it happened that they had been opened on this day I did not inquire. I called the attention of the keeper to this place, requesting explanation as to the use of such narrow cells.

"He seemed, of a sudden, to realize the misfortune that had befallen me, in becoming a tool of that monster I called 'master.'

" 'Be persuaded,' he earnestly ejaculated, 'and relinquish the undertaking. Misery, sickening misery is on every hand. The howling, shrieking cries of despair are continually ringing in my ears with the sobs and sighs, the groans, muttered imprecations and curses of the unfortunates who are, and will be, doomed to the living hell of this place. Even am I compelled to listen to the whispers of maniacs. Remember, no person hath ever escaped to tell of the calamities and sorrows that befall the inmates of this prison. Go! take a rope and hang thyself; dash thy brains against these rocks! Fly! Fly! Do not remain in this accursed place. Leave the dreadful mysteries and this infernal work to me, thy servant, who is past redemption; whose life is a seething caldron of remorse and dread, fit for only such purposes. Thou art young; thy soul is yet pure; thy hand hath not been stained with thy brother's blood. Man,

man, if thou art not already lost; if thou art not yet the slave of the cruelest demon that ever disgraced the name—Humanity, pause, think, and for the sake of all that is good and holy; for the sake of the mother, who gave thee life; for the hope of home and wife, that may'st be thine, if thou wilt go back to the world; that thou may'st have the respect of man and the love of God, I conjure thee, I implore thee, give up this position and fly before it is too late.'

"During this harangue he never once paused, but held my hand, in a grasp that was painful, so strong was it. But the month had done its work. The disrespectful mention of my king and the unfortunate reference to wife and home, made any effect of his pleading useless, unless it was to infuriate a mind already maddened. That moment I resolved to make the keeper the first victim of the demon that possessed me.

" 'Unhand me, thou defiler!' and I pushed him away disdainfully. 'Teach me the use of these cells and cease thy prating.'

"He looked at me for a moment as if he could not understand such savage speech from a companion whom he had taught for the past few weeks. He did not seek to expostulate, but, stepping within the swing door of one of the cells, he dismissed the subject of my peril of soul and exclaimed:

" 'Behold! A man hath but just room enough to stand erect within this infernal portal.'

"An iron grating served for an inner door.

" 'This,' he said, showing me a fastening on the outside, 'may be closed for two or three days, your prisoner will seldom prove obdurate after that length of time. Should he do so, you may close the outer door,

and the supply of air is not sufficient to sustain life many hours.'

"'Try it, thou fool!' I cried and I slammed the grating into its place.

"The fastening secured itself, and I seized the ponderous outer door, and swung it slowly shut. The cry of rage and terror that the keeper uttered, as he comprehended his situation, I will never cease to hear, but at that time it was music to my ears. The rocky door was closed. It did not entirely drown those fearful screams, but I danced up and down the corridors, wild with delight at this my first act of inhuman cruelty.

"I crept back to the door that I had closed forever. A human being begged for mercy from within, but his cries had no power. I reveled in fiendish joy as I listened to the prayer for deliverance, and the promises if I would let him depart in peace.

"From the half hour that I spent at that door came a mania which led me to the committing of a multitude of most foul and unnatural crimes. They come before me now in their consecutive order.

"For two years I rendered unquestioning service to Herod, my king; I learned nothing of the whereabouts of my wife. I began to believe that Herod had forgotten his promise. He never referred to it. Then the thought, that she might have placed herself beyond the reach of even this powerful monarch, came to me and added to my torturing doubts. I had confined myself to the prison and the adjoining palace during all this time.

"Now I began to go about the streets again, perhaps I might find the woman. Brooding thus, I at last became so desperate as to resolve that I would bring the matter of my revenge before the king. This I deter-

mined to do daily, and as often found myself dumb in his presence, not daring to utter a syllable of what was in my mind. I continued to pace the streets, however, and at last, after many days, my vigilance was rewarded. I saw her. She wore a face covering, and was attired in a flowing gown of black, but this could not conceal the beauty of her form, or disguise the undulating grace of her movements. I could not be mistaken. I followed her. She entered the door of a splendid residence, in the best part of the city. She was mistress here. Her manner of opening the door was proof of that.

"Was she living in affluence—with him? I would have rushed before her, driven her from the community, where she seemed so grandly situated, but—no, I had waited long—there was a better way.

"I concealed myself, nearby, where I could command a view of the entrance. I waited, waited; at last a man approached. It was he. He went up the steps and entered the door, where I had seen the form of my wife disappear. I had not been mistaken.

"The next day I did that which I had not done before. I went unbidden to the audience room of Herod. I still loved him. He was my master, but, should he choose to punish my audacity, it could not cause me more anguish than I was now enduring.

"The king received me most kindly. I stood before him in such feverish excitement, such pitiable anxiety that he deigned to ask my wishes.

"'Thy promise, oh, king! My wife, her lover, thou did'st say I should admit them within the doors of Antonia.'

"The king's impassive face showed no surprise, but now, I verily believe his majesty had forgotten that

part of his compact, so little does he care for what concerns his servants, and those within his power. He encouraged me to speak, and I poured out all my pent up misery and the story of how I had, at last, found those I sought. I was of use to Herod then. He could not have replaced me easily. He listened without comment.

“‘Thou hast suffered, my good Dan,’ he said. ‘Also, thou hast served me well.’

“Then, as I knelt before him, he dismissed me and my petition.

“‘Thy duties require thee. Thou may’st go,’ he said.

“As one in stupor I left him. The terrible influence of this man was evidenced, in that the thought of revolt did not occur to me. I went about my tasks as one who dreams, but, within four days, the wife whom I hated, and the man whose life I sought, were confined within the prison where I was almost an absolute master.

“Revenge was within my grasp, and I lauded the master, who has made it possible for me. I fawned upon him, was a sycophant, told myself that it had been but kindness on his part, when I was turned away unsatisfied.

“My time spent among the dungeons, had greatly changed me. In such a place my wife never thought of seeing me. I had cultivated the heavy beard, which thou see’st, for just this contingency. Neither of them recognized me for a moment.

“I placed them in separate cells, well lighted; gave them generous allowances of food and some other comforts. For days I waited upon them myself—listened to their inquiries as to the reason of their incarceration, and made such replies as suited my fancy to

alarm and torment them, all the time guarding the truth. I supplied them bountifully with necessities, that their strength might not give out, not until I should waste it myself.

"Slowly, day by day, I substracted from the comfort, I may say, luxury, allowed them on their first entry. Occasionally I allowed her to visit him at the door of his cell, while I beheld her distress and misgivings. Then I reversed this refinement of cruelty and enjoyed his despair, as he told his misery and uncertainty before the door of her prison.

"I changed their cells, at last, to less comfortable ones, then to the worst ones, short of the real dungeons, then, denied them further intercourse, and finally, all knowledge of each other save as they obtained it through me. In this fashion a year dragged along, during which time they knew the bitterness of every disappointment I could devise.

"One day, when I had reduced the Greek to absolute submission through starvation, I brought her to look upon the skeleton of the man she loved. When she saw him, she uttered a cry and ran to his assistance. I grasped her arm, and held her back.

"'Hold, harlot!' I cried. Something in my voice startled her memory into keen activity. She gazed into my eyes in horrified recognition as she shrank away. The man dragged his emaciated limbs toward me as though, instinctively, to protect the woman.

"I felled him with a blow from the club which I always carried, and threw the miserable wreck of a woman to the further side of the cell. Then, standing between the two, I heaped imprecations upon them.

"The man arose, and, standing as erect as his wasted strength would allow, he dared me to do my worst.

“‘Strike, coward—kill! I know thee. It is all thou can’st do.’ His voice was scarcely more than a whisper for, of a truth, he was barely able to speak.

“‘Think not so!’ I gloated. ‘Thy sufferings have only commenced.’

“‘Mercy!’ moaned my wife, and she flung herself at my feet only to be spurned.

“Why should I continue the story of this horrible revenge, why dwell longer upon the torment that I heaped upon them. Shame and indignity I constantly brought to them, upbraiding them continually with the infamy they had brought me. I did not cease this until he succumbed, and death put an end to his sufferings. Then I threw his body into her cell, and starved her to death in grief and madness.

“Herod delighted in the executioner who consummated his wicked designs. The dungeons were always filled with those of whom the king wished to be rid. For nearly twenty-one years I fattened on the misery I produced, basking in the favor of the king. Now he hath forsaken me, and given me three days in which to make my peace with God and man. I cannot settle my account. I have been commanded to let out my veins. I know too many of the secrets of the king. Before the sun rises in the morning my time on earth is ended. Behold the water, the bath, there is no escape. ‘Tis his order. I must die.”

Judas pushed the roll away, and shook the heavy hair from his forehead.

“This is, in brief, the story of Dan Petros, as he related it to me. Some of the dreadfulness of it may have been conveyed to thee by this reading. Thou could’st not know the intensity of horror that held me spellbound as I listened to his agonized confession,

and saw his wild pleading, as he interrupted himself with prayers to his outraged God.

"I counselled, admonished and encouraged the despairing man, who was confronting compulsory death, as best I could; told him of the tender mercy of a heavenly father who pitied his children, and who had said: 'Though thy sins be as scarlet, yet shall they be white as snow; though they be red, like crimson, they shall be as wool.'

"I left him when the gray of the morning streaked through the eastern sky. Friendless, save for the unutterable pity that filled my being, he closed the door after me, and it was known, among men, that the keeper of the prison had been found, in his bath tub, with his veins emptied."

Rabbi Hillel sighed heavily as the speaker paused. This was only a new proof of the relentless brutality of the king.

"Thou wilt be warned, my son," said the priest in tender solicitude, as he beheld the knitting of Panthera's brow and his clinched hand.

The soldier leaned across the table to Hillel.

"Thou know'st that I must not be careless of what concerns all my life, and hers," he murmured. Then, rising, he grasped the outstretched hand of Judas, "I know not how to thank thee. I cannot but heed the lesson of this experience, which thou so kindly hath placed before me. But, shall I shirk a duty because danger threatens? No, never! I would have thee know that, henceforth, I am a Jew. I know the disdain in which the tyrant is held. I know the sorrows of this people; already more than human heart can bear. I espouse their cause, I will share their suffering. I will attend the hearing before Herod, even though the pri-

son doors on Antonia close about me. Neither her name, nor the name of her dead father shall be defamed without my protest."

The priest and teacher looked at each other in dismay, as Panthera uttered this intrepid speech. It was plain that this splendid son, of a martyred father, would not be intimidated; that he would persist in his determination and, in all likelihood, offend the king.

"Very well," said Judas, seeing a meaning look on the countenance of Hillel. "Rest thee here with us. On the morrow thou shalt be accompanied by a thousand students, to the council chamber of the ruler who hath dared to desecrate the temple of the most high God."

CHAPTER XIX.

PREPARATION FOR THE INQUISITION.

Panthera spent a weary, restless night. The teacher's story, together with the anxieties and events that had crowded so thick and fast upon him, had so jarred his nerves as to make sleep impossible. The discordant awakening of the great city came as a positive relief to his over-strained senses. Action would be the only vent for the indignation and rebellion pent up in the heart of the soldier. The hurry of trampling feet, accompanied by the cries of fruit venders, told that all the city was astir. These familiar sounds seemed to hold more than their ordinary significance, to convey a foreboding of evil that Panthera well knew would be wrought.

The priest, Hillel, had also passed a tiresome night. He joined Panthera unrefreshed, his fine, old face bearing every indication of solicitude.

The friends broke their fast with a light meal, and sauntered forth, hoping to see or hear something that might enlighten them in regard to the proceedings anticipated for the afternoon.

They made their way slowly up the incline toward mount Zion, directing their steps so as to reach the palace of the king. Wandering from place to place, they joined the groups of people, their eyes and ears constantly on the alert for indications that might expose

the designs of Herod concerning the Jewish maiden, and the disposal of the estate that was her inheritance.

As Judas had said, the whole property, of which Joachim had died possessed, was guarded by soldiers and sealed with the seal of the king. Inventories were being made, and the two friends felt little doubt that all this was but the first step toward confiscation. Their conclusion, that the very worst outrage might be expected, was more than confirmed by personal observation and the careful inquiries they made.

Few words of commendation were uttered for the dead merchant. Those who spoke well of Joachim, did so in whispers, while the distributors of evil rumors displayed an activity that betokened the probability of reward for the industrious scattering of reports derogatory to the name and fame of the dead patriarch. These were related whenever an audience could be secured. The very atmosphere seemed full of dread, and the knowledge that whatever was creditable, to the deceased Jew, would find no favor with the king.

For the most part prejudice was aroused quietly, but some orators grew bold enough to harangue the people from the street corners and in the market places. All these creatures, in the pay of the king, set forth, in glowing colors the extent and proportions of the threatened invasion of Judea and Jerusalem.

The sum of the charges, as gathered from all sources, was that, during the last few years of his life, Joachim had aided, assisted and encouraged the enemies of Cæsar and Herod, who were preparing to lead an army from Persia to over-run the eastern provinces of the Republic, enthrone a mighty prince at Jerusalem and establish a kingdom that should rival Rome in splendor.

It was freely charged that the great wealth of the

patriarch had been diverted to this work and that it was now dedicated to this seditious cause. Internal insurrection and revolt had already invaded the very household of Herod. Many of the Jewish soldiers, and some of the German contingent, were under suspicion. It was also claimed that other and more startling accusations would be made at the hearing before the king, the chief priests, scribes and elders.

But for the counsel of the priest, Panthera would not have held his peace, as he recognized, on the surface of all this commotion, the handiwork of the king's emissaries. Their fraudulent methods were too transparent to require research, or investigation, as to their source. Both Hillel and Panthera were satisfied that public resentment and hatred were being augmented, that a decided denunciation would occur at the hearing.

In thus learning the situation, the morning was spent. Noon came finding the wayfarers an hungered. Hillel turned in at the home of a friend and, with Panthera, shared the repast of the family. From this place they observed the relays of troops moving, in companies, toward the palace grounds, sufficient evidence that precaution had been taken for the quelling of any hostile disturbance that might be provoked, or that, under the circumstances, the friends of Joachim might be prepared to make.

After taking leave of their host, Panthera and the priest repaired, without further delay, to the palace grounds where the trial was to take place. It was well nigh the time set when they arrived.

Stretched before them were the wonderful lawns, their natural green abundantly relieved by artistic setting of various hued flowers. Fountains, of every conceivable kind of sculptured marble and granite, sparkled

through the waters gushing from their cunningly devised openings. A profusion of beaten ornaments of brass and copper assisted in giving animation to the scene, attracting the eye and charming the mind. Here and there beneath the shade of mighty branches were placed seats for the public use.

Broad thoroughfares circled throughout the grounds, converging at a wide court of tessellated marble, white and black and beautifully polished.

This court lay at the foot of an expanse of granite steps leading to a raised portico of highly polished stone. These steps served for seats from which could be obtained a view of the paved court and the gardens beyond. At the top of the splendid flight, was placed a heavy turreted battlement with embrasures, behind which large bodies of troops could be concealed.

In the center of this battlement gleamed a dais, draped with crimson. A massive Roman eagle, burnished in gold, with outspread wings and head thrown forward, surmounted the canopy, in apparent readiness to swoop down on the multitude. Underneath was the seat of the king, of chiselled stone and raised so that the occupant might have an unobstructed view of every person before him.

Here it was that Herod chose to sit, and listen to matters which might effect the welfare of his people. Here, in turn, he might carry out his designs against them. Proclamation was always made as to the time, and matter which would be heard, and these days were looked forward to, set apart, as *gala days*, when the people would be allowed some license and the privilege of taking part in the demonstrations.

Huge pillars of polished granite were set at regular distances extending from either side of this judgment

seat out beyond the checkered pavement, a colonnade on which were stretched canvas curtains shutting out the rays of the sun and the glare of the eastern day.

Soldiers, horse and foot, had been moving all the forenoon, in squads and companies, from the neighboring fortresses, taking up positions of advantage in near proximity to the palace. Since daybreak, Jewish horsemen had patrolled the grounds. These demonstrations had the double effect of overaweing the people and giving the matter in hand a precautionary, war-like appearance.

The crowd that had gathered at the mount Zion market place in the forenoon, lingered in the vicinity until the hour set for the hearing, then added its number to the motley assembly already gathered before the palace. It was a noisy multitude. Discussion ran rampant. Many other themes, besides the one in question were mooted and argued with an earnestness that was surprising, when the awe in which the people stood was considered.

Students of the different Jewish sects, and from the different places of learning, were present, and prominent from the active part they were taking in the various discussions affecting the welfare of their countrymen. Their religious and political differences were known by the clothing, or the distinctive marks and badges, which they wore.

They were united in some things. In general these young men had a deep seated hatred against the government of Rome, and, so far as this might include Herod, against him as well. Their reckless indifference to danger, or the authority of the king, bordered on insane presumption. Frequently these gatherings ended in riot and bloodshed.

Panthera and the priest forced their way to a position of advantage at the base of one of the green marble pillars, near the foot of the steps leading to Herod's seat.

Within a short time a company of trumpeters and other musicians, appeared on the balcony above, all of whom, at the proper signal, were to help announce the presence of his majesty.

These were followed by the priests, scribes, elders and officers, of the king's household, who passed in single file to the places reserved for them.

Fine linen, a profusion of gold lace and gaudy uniforms, and the sparkle of gems and precious stones contrasted with the sombre robes of the priesthood, as these retainers and supporters of the "king of the Jews" took their positions.

A body-guard of stalwart warriors with shining helmets, breastplates burnished to the brightness of mirrors, armed with short swords and carrying leather shields, marched into the portico. They were headed by a band and the air fairly trembled with sweet strains of music as these men, clothed in the uniform of the Roman Legendary, filled all the available space near the throne-like structure where Herod was to sit in judgment.

Silence fell upon the spectators. The glitter of the gold bullion decorating the suits of the warriors dazzled the eyes of admiring devotees and disdainful students, as the body-guard became motionless, waiting for the king.

A gaudily attired herald advanced to a vacant space before the empty seat. He lifted his hand, and a shrill blast from the trumpets pierced the air.

"Behold thy king! The Lord's anointed! By his

grace; king of the Jews!" announced the herald in a clear voice that vibrated throughout the beautiful gardens.

At this instant, Herod was discovered coming slowly from within the palace. Alexes, the husband of the king's sister, Salome, supported him on one side, while on the other walked Solan Hai, the rich and opulent seer of Jerusalem.

"Hail to the king!" and again "Long live the king!" The populace shouted itself hoarse.

The face of Herod was not an unpleasant one to behold. Black, piercing eyes, that had not lost their lustre, shone from under heavy overhanging brows. A wreath was bound about his scanty white locks, and the flowing beard lent dignity to his commanding appearance. The bent form and stern face, however, betrayed the ravages of time. He was richly clothed in white robes trimmed with purple, and every movement of his person brought a gleam of priceless jewels to the light of day. They adorned his breast, his throat and almost covered his fingers, which were plump and white despite his age.

He exhibited some impatience as assistance was proffered him, yet the weight of seventy years of activity was upon him. For thirty years he had been a ruler, a king, a powerful man and a mighty general; feared where he was not respected, and, by many, looked up to as a god. He sat in the councils of his countrymen, demanding, and expecting, the homage due his exalted rank and station.

His creatures and retainers, were treated as slaves, without distinction, from the lowest in rank and grade to the highest dignitaries.

Fear had never been an element of the king's charac-

ter, except that within a short time previous a strange distemper had possessed his body. Its development had disturbed his mind to an alarming extent. The thought of death had forced itself upon him, and he shrank from it in consternation and dread, if not in abject terror.

To-day he rallied and displayed his customary energy to a very large degree. His cupidity and avarice were aroused; in these propensities there was no satisfying him. His greed for wealth was ever on the increase, that he might indulge his love for profligate display of grandeur.

He would not allow this opportunity, to secure the riches of Joachim, to pass without due care; nor, without show of due process of law and justice. Everything that might dazzle the eyes of the multitude, quiet his own conscience and answer the questions of the reckless, who might be foolhardy enough to interfere with the righteousness of this inquisition, had been done and accomplished. Herod was pleased with the work.

The old man paused for a moment and gazed into the sea of faces uplifted to him. Without seeming to do so, he shook off the supporting hands, and sanctimoniously raised his arms and turned his eyes heavenward. He then bowed, in a courtly manner, to the throng, and, ascended to his judgment seat without further assistance.

A cry went up. It seemed to rend the canopy; to shake the very palace.

"A god! A god! Who is like him? Our king—
'The King of the Jews.'"

CHAPTER XX.

JUDGMENT SEAT—DEGRADATION.

The preceding week had been given over to preparations for this day. The proclamation of the king had been supplemented by announcements, from the town criers, of the matter that would occupy the attention of the king and his subjects. The names of the principal witnesses were also known, and such others as might know ought of interest, were invited to appear on this occasion, when they would not only be privileged, but expected, to give their testimony, or submit reasons why judgment should not be entered against the dead merchant, and his property be confiscated to the king, by reason of sedition and treason on his part, during his life time.

The deceased had been a mighty man, a person of good repute; had been a notable giver of large alms; was remembered as a friend of the people. This show of regularity and legal form, with its pompous display of fairness, had for its ultimate object an answer, if inquiries should be made by appeal to Rome.

Justification for this wholesale confiscation could only be had through the establishing of this charge against the name of Joachim, and even Herod was forced to use both energy and precaution in securing witnesses who could be relied upon to deceive the Jews, not in the confidence of the king, and the Romans, who might investigate.

Nearly all the priests, scribes and elders, connected with the Jewish system of worship, were creatures of Herod's own making and advancement. They were now in attendance, ready to acquiesce in the desires of their ruler, or perform his bidding.

The herald advanced to the front and demanded silence, at the same time announcing:

"All is now in readiness. All persons having knowledge of the matter before the king are invited to come forward that they may be heard."

A lawyer, attached to the household of the king, presented the information in which the charges were made. This he proceeded to read from a roll. It was a long, systematic arrangement of statements, made with the customary verbose, and redundant allegations, specifications and particulars, the hearing of which, if it served no other purpose, went far toward mystifying those who listened and impressing them with the importance of the document.

Throughout the instrument was this ever uppermost prominent charge: "Joachim had maliciously, wickedly, without fear of God, or regard for the peace and wellbeing of man, conspired, with divers other persons unknown, against the life of the king, the liberty and independence of his countrymen."

Witnesses were about to be produced who would offer testimony in support of these charges, and all of Joachim's kin and name were here given opportunity to vindicate the honor of the dead Israelite, and to show cause why the property, real and personal, should not become forfeit to the crown.

Panthera listened to the reading with deep concern. Never so much as a word was lost upon him. Partly prepared for this by the admonitions of the priests, he

was nevertheless, amazed and indignant, beyond restraint as the reading of the cunningly devised instrument was finished. To the honorable Roman, it had been a revelation of the character of Herod.

Without stopping to consider, and before his companion could interfere, Panthera sprang forward and began ascending the steps toward the king. Knowing how ill-fitted the soldier must be to cope with the shrewd advocate, who had prepared the carefully framed information, the priest uttered a low exclamation of horror and followed instantly in the wake of his rash pupil.

Half way up the steps he laid his trembling hand on the arm of the soldier.

"Restrain thyself," he whispered. "Thou wilt injure thy cause."

A deeper hush fell upon the people. The dullest among them knew that a new element had entered into the plans of Herod. For a moment Panthera hesitated, one foot planted on the step above, his face turned defiantly toward the surprised king and his attendants, he yet allowed Hillel to detain him and listened to the rapid expostulation of the thoroughly alarmed priest.

This lasted but a moment, then, daring and unsubdued, Panthera cried in a voice audible to hundreds of expectant ears:

"I will not listen to such charges! They are untrue! False in every particular!"

A stir suddenly animated the assembly; a murmur of approval arose and some of the students in their zeal cried out:

"We know it! Joachim was our friend! Proof—we demand proof!"

Confusion and riot seemed imminent. Under cover

of the commotion, Hillel again attempted to silence the soldier.

"Wait, I beseech thee," he implored.

Panthera was about to answer, when a rush of the king's troops, carried both of them to the court below and compelled them to mingle with the turbulent crowd as the guard quelled the demonstration in favor of Panthera's interference.

Hillel clung to the arm of the soldier, determined not to be separated from him. He continued to protest, most vigorously, until at last Panthera yielded to the reasonable importunities and quietly returned to his former position.

The crowd willingly made way for the champion of their dead countryman. The students gathered near and by their demeanor, gestures and language gave unmistakable indication of their intention to render Panthera active support, should occasion require their assistance. These young men were satisfied that a grave injury was about to be inflicted against the revered name of their patron.

Solan Hai whispered something to the lawyer, evidently calling his attention to the soldier, for the watchful eyes of the advocate turned, in keen discrimination, to the group at the foot of the steps. The king, also, was gazing at the soldier, who had become the center of interest for the time being.

Again the advocate took a position before the king, and in full view of the people. It was a signal for attention. Addressing the king, the priests, scribes and elders, he dwelt in detail upon what had already been read from the roll. He concluded with a grand and eloquent peroration, in which he pledged himself to prove the allegations contained in the information.

Immediately at the conclusion of the oration a shout was raised lauding the advocate of the king. And again did the people hail Herod, "king of kings," "prince of potentates" and "savior of his country."

The clamor had been skillfully arranged, and was a sure index of the result which might be expected. Renegade Jews and foreigners were ready at signal to make outburst and demonstration in favor of the ends in view.

"Solan Hai! Solan Hai! Solan Hai!" called the herald.

The uncouth figure of the wizard was brought into prominence as he stepped briskly to the place assigned witnesses while testifying. The experience was not a new one for him and he looked boldly toward the advocate, who was to conduct the inquiry.

As a witness, Solan Hai was all the king could have wished. He set forth distinctly and with all possible plainness, the facts and circumstances charged against Joachim. The knowledge, he professed, had been obtained from diligent observation and personal inquiries on his part in pursuing the various clews that had led to the unearthing of the plot against the king, and from numerous other sources. He dwelt, at great length, upon matters pertaining to the meeting of the wise men near Hebron; coloring and emphasizing so as to make the most of the meager facts in his possession.

The wizard returned to his place, close to the king, at the close of the examination of his important self, and waited, lynx-eyed, for the next witness. This proved to be one of the servants of Joachim, who had been with the wealthy Jew at the camp.

He explained, with great minuteness, the forming of

the camp at the place near Hebron and the arrival of the persons who had been visitors there; described in detail the completeness of their traveling outfit, well equipped, having horses and camels to spare and a corps of well trained attendants.

That they were from the East, he knew because they had come from that direction and returned over the same route, and on several occasions they had mentioned India, Babylonia and Arabia. They must have been persons of extensive knowledge, for they had displayed a good show of learning and culture.

The witness believed that they were princes and, in all likelihood, eastern kings. The witness had overheard much of the conversation between Joachim and his mysterious guests. Frequent mention had been made of the expected king, a mighty personage, an irresistible warrior, who would overcome all enemies and vanquish all governments. The time for the display of this coming man's wondrous power was at hand. There could be no mistake; the witness had heard with his own ears all the story. He believed Joachim had arranged this meeting for the sole purpose of entertaining these same people, who had been his guests, because he had broken camp immediately after the departure of the easterners.

The servant recounted, with great volubility and braggadocio, the story of the attack on the camp on the morning of the day when his master had died; told of his own resistance and brave defense until relieved by one Caius Panthera, a soldier who had arrived but a short time before, and who was holding conference with Joachim at the time of the onslaught. He gave credit to the soldier for service rendered in the extremity of need, and told how the Roman had

mounted his horse and galloped after the man who had stolen the beloved Mary.

The witness identified the soldier at the foot of the steps as the rescuer of Joachim's daughter and further testified that the same soldier had been with Mary and Joseph, but a day or so since, when Mary returned to the camp and directed the disposal of the outfit.

Throughout the questioning of this witness Solan Hai seemed to be compelling the answers that fell from his lips. The wizard had a powerful control over the man. He had bought him with gold.

Other witnesses were now sworn. Many of them knowing nothing more than what they had been told. The interest waned and the spectators began to converse among themselves.

Simon Gatzor, the merchant from Hebron, was called and the interest revived.

He said in substance that Joachim had been his countryman; that the town of Nazareth had been the home of the dead Jew, and their friendly intercourse had extended over a number of years, during which time they had engaged in many business transactions.

In the presence of this witness, Joachim had frequently denied the right of Herod to the title "King of the Jews"; had declared that one would soon appear who would destroy the present government and set up a kingdom at Jerusalem—Rome would be completely overthrown and subjugated, while the Jewish nation would become the head of all nations. The witness knew that Joachim had met with others of this same belief, most of whom were from the far East, and who spoke a tongue with which he, Simon Gatzor, was not acquainted.

He testified as to the presence of Panthera at Hebron

on the evening of the day of Joachim's death. The soldier had been the guest of the witness and had left his home very mysteriously, without so much as saying a word of farewell.

More than all this he mentioned a personal grievance against the Roman. The latter had thrown a spell about Alta, the daughter of the witness. He declared that her natural kindly disposition was changed, so that she was regardless of the wishes of her parent; that since the departure of the man she had been entirely beyond control. All this, the witness verily believed, was due to the baneful influence of this soldier.

Panthera was pointed out to the witness and he promptly recognized him as the destroyer of the peace of Alta.

Herod was frowning darkly. He would know what Panthera had to do with this conspiracy, why he had been so much with Joachim and, afterward, with Mary, for what reason he had become the guest of Simon Gatzor.

"Let the soldier answer!" sharply interposed the king. "Stand aside," to the advocate. "I, myself will examine him. Let his name be called."

"Caius Panthera!" The herald shouted the name three times.

Almost before the tones died away the Roman stood before the king.

"One of the German retinue, thou art a hired soldier?" demanded the king in austere tones.

"Aye," responded the Roman. "In the pay of the 'King of the Jews.'"

"To betray him to his enemies?"

"I trust not," answered Panthera proudly. "I am a soldier, and a Roman."

"Thou hast heard the testimony of these witnesses. Thou may'st answer," said Herod, stern displeasure growing in his voice. "Proceed."

"I am pleased, oh, king, that thy servant is thus given opportunity to defend the name and fame of an inoffensive old man, who loved his God and revered and obeyed the law of one Moses, an ancient lawgiver of Israel, and had an affectionate place in his heart for his countrymen and a kindly regard for the rest of mankind.

"That instantly serving God, day and night, he, together with many other holy and devout men, did look forward to the redemption of the promises made of God to his fathers, is most true. From the house of David, of which he was a descendant, being of the tribe of Judah, he looked for a king who would rule his people in equity and righteousness.

"I regret that it was not my lot to have had an acquaintance with Joachim. He was not a soldier nor a warrior; neither was he engaged in conspiring with others against the rule of Cæsar nor, thine, oh, king. But if the Israelitish people would testify before thee this day, thou would'st know that they believe the promises made of God unto their fathers; to which promises the tribes of Israel cling from day to day, and hope to come.

"Is it not true, ye priests of Jerusalem? Do ye not expect a king from the royal house of David who shall triumph over all and rule the world? What say ye, priests, scribes and elders? Answer!"

The fervor of the soldier, his daring and the force of his words carried the cause of Joachim closer to the Jews. With one accord the prominent men present murmured assent to the time-honored prediction and

expectation. Hillel, above all, fearlessly exclaimed, in a voice of conviction:

"We do. Most certainly we do expect a king who shall fulfill the prophecy made by the fathers. Thou art right."

The king understood. His frown deepened to a scowl of displeasure and fear.

"Go to," he cried. "I do not desire to hear further of this wondrous person expected by the Jews. Nor did I wish thee to speak of Joachim, whom, out of thine own mouth, thou hast condemned and proven a rebel and a seditious person.

"In thine own behalf thou wert called. Thou hast chosen to disregard thy opportunity. Thou art degraded, and dismissed from the service. Thy case shall be sent to Cæsar. In the meantime, thou art limited to Jerusalem and Judea. Report every week until charges shall be duly preferred against thee and inquiry be made. Thou may'st be thankful thou art not confined in Antonia, or sent in chains to Rome.

"Of this Joachim matter my judgment will be delivered later.

"My people!" he cried rising and extending his arms toward the gaping crowd. "Remain here. This day I will distribute to each a gift in commemoration of this deliverance from danger. Shout thy praises to God who preserveth his children from the evil designs of men."

The music swelled into the air. The rabble shouted:
"Hail to the king! The Lord's anointed!"

CHAPTER XXI.

THE BETROTHAL—THE WARNING.

It was night and the cold gray sky was spangled with myriads of stars. Silence reigned, the palpable stillness of the advanced evening. The philosopher, Hababli Hillel, Caius Panthera and the beautiful daughter of Joachim stood near the memorial stones placed to commemorate the angel visitation to Jacob, over twenty-five hundred years before.

The calm features of Hillel wore a look of loving tenderness as he gazed upon the two who stood before him.

"My children," he was saying, "thou wilt join thy right hands. Thou, Panthera, will repeat after me:

"In the presence of heaven, with its canopy over me, by the silver shining stars; by the sacred associations and memories of this hallowed spot; by the declaration of the patriarch, Jacob; that, 'it is the gate of heaven'; by all that I hold dear in this world, or hope for in the world to come, do I, Caius Panthera, swear fealty to the maiden at my side, whose constant, loving husband I shall be.

"I solemnly promise at this, my espousal to Mary, whose hand is clasped in mine, that I will cherish and protect her, whether in health or sickness, in riches or in poverty, in her age, as in her youth. I will defend and love her above all others, so long as I may live. I accept her as my betrothed wife, and place this circle

on her finger as a token of endless love. May the God of Israel keep me true and steadfast to these, my vows."

The clear music of the Roman's voice thrilled the heart of Mary as she listened to this formal declaration. Her trusting soul was uplifted by a great hope of happiness as she realized the depth of affection that was given her. She lifted her eyes, brimming with tears, to the face of the priest, but her voice never faltered as she reverently repeated after him the beautiful formula:

"Sacred to my heart is the God of my people. The law of the Lord is my stay, a guide unto my feet, and a light unto my steps. Let my mind be inclined to the oracles of God. May I bring these graces to my husband, Caius Panthera, with all else I am possessed of in this world.

"I promise that I will encourage him in joy and in sorrow; trust him without wavering; love him without faltering; for him, bear all things, endure all things, believe all things, and hope all things, so long as I shall live. May the angel messengers of Israel's God hear my vows and preserve me ever steadfast."

The hand of the aged priest trembled, as he laid it in benediction on the head of the devoted maid.

"So be it!" he said. "May the richest blessings of heaven fall upon thee, my children. May thou be blessed in thy going out and in thy coming in; in basket and in store. May thine enemies be destroyed and those who befriend thee be preserved. May thy children be a crown of glory to thee and thine and all the world besides. Should a son be born to thee; grant that he may be a pillar of strength, a strong tower and fortress, a light for thine eyes, a joy to thine heart and

a never ending source of comfort and peace to thee and all the rest of mankind."

The espoused maid and her lover had bowed their heads while the priest was speaking. At mention of the last word the clear canopy above them took on a lighter hue; it brightened until the three saw each other's faces as in the white light of noonday. A stir in the air, as of the rustle of wings, lifted the clinging tendrils of curling hair from Mary's brow. The light and the wind lasted but for an instant, long enough for Mary to look into the eyes of her espoused husband and read the longing love that answered her soulful glance. As the brightness died away, he swept her into his arms, where she clung, quivering in his tightening grasp. Bending over her he lifted the tearful face and reverently kissed her.

"Mary, my own," he murmured. "My life—my wife! Look into my face—into my eyes. Tell me dost thou love me?"

"My lord, my husband!" she answered. "Can it be that thou would'st question my love for thee?"

"No," he cried, "I will not. I do not, but, I would hear thee say thou lovest, 'tis music in my ears."

"I worship thee," exclaimed Mary and she nestled her head close to his bosom lest he knew too well the joy that transfigured her enraptured face.

Panthera turned to where his faithful friend, the priest, had stood. Hillel had withdrawn—they were alone.

At that moment the form of a man glided swiftly into the dark shadows of the night. It was not the priest, another had witnessed the rite of betrothal between Panthera, now a Jewish proselyte, and the daughter of the Jew, Joachim.

When Hillel entered his humble abode he found Joseph seated before the table in the front room. The man's head was bent and rested on his arms. He did not move. Hillel approached and laid his hand on the shoulder of his guest, who started up as though from a dream.

"Wert thou sleeping, my friend?" asked Hillel.

"No," Joseph answered, "thinking, dreaming—enduring my own misery." He turned a face of ashy paleness toward his questioner.

Hillel saw that Joseph had been weeping and he beheld the haggard countenance of his guest with consternation.

"What, I pray, hath disturbed thee?" he asked, in anxious solicitude.

"Nothing—I thank thee, nothing. I will seek repose," and Joseph abruptly ended the interview by passing from the room.

"What can have troubled the faithful Joseph?" wondered Hillel.

Mary and Panthera entered at the moment. Their faces were suffused with the happy glow of love. Again did Hillel affectionately bless them as they bade him "good night."

At Jerusalem, a few hours later, a dust-stained traveler awoke Solan Hai, who gave him immediate audience.

"Costa, my friend, thou art a jewel," was the sole comment of the wizard after listening to a report from the man.

The statement of Costa was of much value to Solan

Hai—it was the news of the betrothal. Thus another became acquainted with the matter that was designed to be imparted to only the immediate friends of Mary.

It had been agreed that Mary should accompany Joseph to his home at Nazareth; while Panthera returned to Jerusalem to answer the charge of disloyalty to the king. Accordingly the soldier, on the following morning, committed to the care of her countryman the fair maid, with whom he was fain to linger, and with much apprehension departed on his way to the city.

For days he waited, having taken up his abode at the college, that he might learn more of the Jewish customs and beliefs.

He grew weary and discouraged as time dragged, when, one morning the captain of the king's guard personally called on him with the information that an interview with the king would be required on the following afternoon. The captain vouchsafed no further information. What misfortune awaited him, the soldier could not know. He was aware that power and interest would be required in his behalf, when he remembered that Solan Hai was an avowed enemy. The fact that there was more than a mere coloring in the charge of treason, which might be brought, loomed before him with vivid distinctness. He understood that it would not be difficult for the subtle methods of this man to produce proof sufficient to sustain any accusation he might see fit to make.

The thing that darkened his soul was the thought of separation from the beautiful maid, who was all in all to him. Now that he was assured of her love, it was a sore trial of fortitude to remember that he might enter

the doors of Antonia, never to see her more. The possibility did not seem remote.

He sprang to his feet intending to find Hillel; to consult with him; to entrust a message of tenderest love and advice in case he were to be deprived of the right to protect his lovely fiancée. He began to upbraid himself for the selfishness that had allowed him to bind Mary by a promise, when it might render her a mourner for a lost love.

He learned that Hillel had not returned to the city; that he was not expected, and in the anguish of mind, that he suffered, determined to confide in Judas. That learned, kindly teacher, received the soldier with cordial greetings. In truth Judas had learned to love the noble Roman. From that interview Panthera went forth as one uplifted—sustained by a consciousness of innate rectitude.

The day after at the appointed hour, he approached the palace. There was a feeling of relief in his heart as he realized, that before the sun should sink behind the mountains of Judea, he would know what was in store for him.

The grounds were crowded with soldiers and citizens. Many of the former had been his companions in arms and friends of Panthera. They greeted him in the off-hand manner, characteristic of the soldier and, in spite of his misgivings, the cheerful familiarity gave him courage. The honest, heartfelt well wishes of these comrades went far to strengthen the soldier for the coming ordeal.

To be accused of disloyalty, suspended from service in his company and summarily dismissed from the presence of Herod, had been a keen mortification. He had

not appeared among these companions since the day of the hearing.

A herald called the distinguished name "Caius Panthera!" He responded, instantly, following the courtly young usher into the presence of his majesty—the king.

With grave courtesy the soldier bowed before the ruler, but in his demeanor was none of that which sues for mercy. In proud self-possession he stood awaiting the pleasure of Herod.

"Caius Panthera," spoke the king, "thou hast been charged with a grave and serious offense, not only against the 'king of the Jews,' but also, against Augustus and the Senate. I have made diligent inquiry into the facts and circumstances connected with these charges." The speaker paused and looked curiously into the face of his auditor. "I am of the opinion that thy conduct was most exemplary and circumspect," he continued. "Thou art restored to the company of the German retinue, with the vindication of the king, and commended as a brave soldier, a true and loyal citizen of Rome, and a liege retainer of the fortunes of Herod, 'king of the Jews.'"

An exclamation of glad surprise rose to the lips of Panthera.

The stern, relentless monarch seemed to enjoy the confusion of the soldier, thrown off his guard by this good fortune, as no disaster, in the power of Herod to cause, would have effected him.

"Not a word," said the king. "Join thy company, forthwith." He gave a signal. A blast of trumpets echoed through the magnificent corridors of the beautiful building. The clanging of swords and shields mingled with the trumpet sounds, and a rush of soldiers

fairly carried Panthera to the outer court before he had recovered from his astonishment.

In the midst of the congratulations that were showered upon him an officer placed in his hands a written permit for absence from duty for the space of three months. The largess of the king.

A dream of peace and happiness floated before the bewildered senses of the soldier. He thought only of Mary, the maid of his choice. He would lose no precious time. He would repair at once to Nazareth, and inform her of his good fortune, that his rejoicing might be doubled through her thankful pleasure.

The next day Panthera once more donned the splendid uniform of his company and prepared to depart for a time from the city. As he passed through the gate a firm hand was laid on his bridle rein.

"Caius Panthera!" cried a deep voice. "Trust not too much to the snake, that fawns and allures, only to strike and kill. Fly to Rome, the only place where safety is for thee and thine. I have warned thee. Forget it not!"

The soldier looked down in startled attention. He saw a strange figure, clothed in a dark grab that covered the entire body, while the disguise was completed by a cowl drawn over the face. Before the rider could question, the hold on the rein was relinquished and the strange apparition disappeared in the crowd.

CHAPTER XXII.

LIVING OR DEAD, I WILL RETURN.

The picturesque village of Nazareth, its white dwellings covered with clinging vines, appeared to be a most desirable destination when viewed from a distance. Its narrow streets were not discernable, neither was the deplorable condition of squallor, that prevailed in many parts, perceptible.

Oxen plowed the little valley below the town and the fields of the great plain beyond; while mules, asses and camels bore their burdens up the mountain track, as they had done for centuries before.

The most conspicuous object, in the view of an approaching traveler, was the synagogue. It occupied the most sightly place in the village, an evidence of the reverence and devotion of the inhabitants for the God of their fathers.

Joachim had been well known and loved by the dwellers within this village. His memory was held in respect, and they welcomed Joseph home in true Hebrew style; while Mary was greeted as the special ward of all the people of Nazareth, the town of her nativity.

As is the case, in every small place, the people were familiar one with another. The market days, Mondays and Thursdays, the often recurring fasts and feasts, and the Sabbaths, so brought the villagers together that news quickly became general. So it was that the facts

surrounding the death of their former townsman, were well canvassed by the residents even before the arrival of Joseph and his ward.

The heroic rescue of Mary had been a common topic of conversation and much curiosity was aroused as to the Roman soldier, who was said to have saved the honor and life of Joachim's daughter.

Panthera had accomplished his journey and was approaching the home of Mary. Many inquiring glances were directed to the handsome stranger as he rode toward the center of the town, his brilliant uniform attracting attention at every turn.

At length he drew rein at the khan and secured an attendant for his horse. His inquiry for Joseph, was answered promptly, and full directions were given as to his place of residence. In accordance with these, Panthera walked rapidly through the winding streets into the better part of the town.

He paused before a white abode in the midst of a fragrant garden. Roses and other bright blossoms, in profusion, filled the air with perfume—a sweet welcome to the unexpected guest. Whirling doves circled above his head, and away to their cot, as Panthera made his way along the trim path. The habitation gave no signs of occupation. Could it be that he had mistaken the place or that those he sought were absent?

As he stood, irresolutely looking about, a glance toward the street revealed Mary, herself, coming to the gate. She saw the soldier and quickened her steps in joyful surprise. A few paces from Panthera she suddenly paused. The bright uniform had not been worn by her lover when he bade her farewell—he had been in disgrace, under charges of dishonor, now he returned more resplendent than before.

Panthera had overlooked this cause, and he approached Mary, full of astonishment at her abrupt pause. He held his hands out to her.

"Hast thou no welcome? Dost thou fear me?"

"The uniform," she explained allowing her hands to remain in the loving grasp.

"My love, I had forgotten. Herod hath restored me to my place in the company; completely exonerated thy lover, and graciously given him leave of three months."

Mary's rosebud face flushed with pleasurable emotion. What a glad ending this to her suspense. She looked at the manly beauty of the soldier, displayed to advantage by the becoming costume, and pride swelled warmly into her thankful heart.

She invited Panthera into the tasty dwelling, a more pretentious place than most of those in Nazareth, and they were presently joined by Joseph.

"Thou art welcome to our home," observed the guardian slowly. But a look of pain glided across his features as he spoke, and Panthera felt a tremble in the hand clasp. What could have given annoyance to this worthy man? The question was the sole mar to the delight of the Roman.

Days passed into weeks, weeks grew into months. The soldier lingered, and, to the interested villagers, he appeared to have taken up a permanent residence in Nazareth. During this time he obtained a place in the good graces of the people with whom he came in contact.

He was a constant attendant, with Joseph and Mary, at the synagogue, participating with them in all the observances according to the law of Moses. Moreover, he was on intimate terms with the Rabbi and the other

priests, scribes and elders who administered the rites of the sacred place.

From all these indications the curious ones might have been pardoned for the statement, given as fact, that the soldier had become a convert to the true faith, had submitted to the rite of circumcision, and was being instructed in the law of Moses, the holy oracles and the traditions of the fathers.

His constant attendance upon the ward of Joseph did not pass without comment, especially among those of Mary's own sex, who were jealous for the good name of the Jewish maiden, yet many of whom would have been willing to share with her the responsibility of entertaining the cultured stranger.

The gossips failed to penetrate the mystery, and the constancy on his part at last provoked animosity and scorn. It began to be whispered that no good would come from this protracted visit; that, to say the least, Mary was very imprudent; that Joseph should concern himself and look into the matter.

Strange to say, when Joseph was approached, he cut all questioning short by informing the interrogators that it was an affair concerning only the two principals, in which he would not interfere. This much said, he invariably went away, leaving the committee on the affairs of others to settle the matter of their mortification and chagrin as best they might.

About six weeks after the advent of the interesting soldier, an occurrence of more than passing importance aroused and piqued the curiosity of the zealous neighbors.

One evening, at the going down of the sun, two travelers were seen wending their way along the narrow road leading from the south toward Nazareth.

They were both aged men, one of them, in particular, being well stricken in years.

They entered the village and rode to the khan, where they left their horses, as Panthera had done. Unlike the soldier, however, they did not make inquiries, but started as those who are familiar with the way they go.

One of the travelers was Hillel, the teacher and friend of Panthera, the other, a brother priest.

They took their way directly to the home of Joseph, where they tarried for the space of three days. During which time the newsmongers noticed that they were on friendly terms and intimately associated with the soldier guest.

On the third night, light glimmered from the habitation until a late hour. To add to the mystery of the matter, the venerable priests departed in the night, and before any one had learned ought of their mission. These inquisitive Nazareens believed themselves entitled to some degree of confidence, but their carefully discreet insinuations gained them no information in regard to the untoward actions of the soldier, and the unusual transactions that must have taken place within their hitherto orderly precincts.

The reason for the entry and mysterious exit of the priests was withheld, which fact only whetted the curiosity of the Jews. Joseph informed his most intimate friends, that a long journey, which lay before his guests, necessitated their early departure—nothing more.

The longer the soldier remained the more attentive he became to Mary. He appeared to anticipate her every wish; seemed to exist only for her and in her society. Tale-bearers wagged their heads and told of fond appellations and endearing phrases which they had over-

heard addressed to the maid by this presumptuous Roman.

Joseph continued to be the same impertrubable non-communicative person he had been ever since this condition of affairs commenced. He was constantly procuring comfort and pleasure for both Mary and Panthera. To all appearances he was genuinely interested in their enjoyments, though he was frequently seen to contemplate the two as if lost in bitter reverie.

Dispite the freedom with which the soldier greeted those who were thrown in contact with him; for all his generosity, in the treatment of everyone, there was a reserve and austerity about him that could not be penetrated. Something in his grand manner forbade questioning.

All too swiftly passed the leave of absence given by Herod. The day and hour, when Panthera must return to Jerusalem, was come. Within the room, that had grown to be a shrine, stood the soldier, prepared for his return to the service of the king. Before him, with bowed head and pale face, Mary struggled, in vain, to curb her grief.

"How shall I live without thee?" she sobbed. "Thou art my all. I shall be alone."

Panthera brought every effort in his power to subdue his emotions, that he might comfort the woman.

"Life of my life!" he whispered, drawing her into a fond embrace. "Thou knowest that I will return so soon as I can sever my connection with the army. I will be alone, also. Thou wilt not doubt me?" He held her from him that he might search the face of his love.

"Never—no never, could I doubt thee, my lord, my husband; but I cannot dispel the fear that torments my

soul. If ought befall thee where shall I ever find rest? Where shall I go? Where shall I dwell?"

"Let not thine heart be troubled. I will hasten to thee. Our lives shall be one, only one, all our days." Again he pressed the beautiful form close to his breast, looking longingly into the white face uplifted to his own.

"My prayers shall follow thee," she said bravely. "I will try to banish my fears. I know that thou lovest me, that thou wilt return."

"I do love thee," he answered. "I will love thee even unto death. And after that," he added passionately. "I swear to thee, I will return, even should death itself overtake me, yet shalt thou see me again. I will return."

Mary trembled, beholding the earnestness of her lover.

"Joseph, good friend, of ours, will be often at Jerusalem. Thou wilt send messages by him?" she entreated.

"Indeed yes, fond messages," he replied. "The time will fly, mine own. Remember, the sister of the king, is my friend. She will assist in obtaining my release from the service. Then shall I be with thee, never to be parted more."

Again he kissed the fair face, tenderly reassuring the confiding Mary of the strength of his love for her.

A knock at the door interrupted them. The discrete Joseph entered. A short time afterward the soldier rode out of the village, traveling south, and disappeared over the hills towards Jerusalem. Mary watched his receding form, dashing away the tears that blinded her, that she might have another glimpse of the man she loved.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A CONSPIRACY.

The home of Simon Gatzor, at Hebron, was closed. Since the day of the hearing at Jerusalem he had remained in the city, and had taken up quarters in one of the most sumptuous residences on mount Bezetha, on the inside of the new wall.

Alta was installed as mistress of the home, but Simon Gatzor seldom appeared, either in the living rooms of the house, or on the streets of the city.

The young woman launched into an extravagant mode of living that astonished and dumbfounded her father. Her imperious will seemed to know no law beyond her own desire and the parent ceased to expostulate, gradually allowing himself to sink to insignificance in the economy of the household.

Solan Hai was in some way connected with this change of residence and with the handsome young Jewess. He was her ardent admirer, a slave to her every wish and caprice, and a constant attendant upon her. His infatuation carried him to extremes. He obeyed her slightest wish, as though it amounted to a command he was bound to obey. Her rule over the wretch was exacting in every particular, no relaxation or cessation. Her demands knew no limit; no expenditure seemed lavish enough to satisfy her whims.

Alta Gatzor's new position might have been her birthright, so readily did she accept her surroundings,

so accustomed did she seem to her privileges and immunities. The wealth of the wizard was at her disposal, and she used it with a prodigal hand. Servants, equipages, costly apparel, diamonds and rich jewels formed the least of her comforts. The fame of her beauty spread throughout the city and her name was in the mouth of the rabble. Her grandeur and opulence were the subject of universal comment.

This daring, dashing creature was equal to every emergency. A new existence had opened before her and she seemed to know the way to make the most of it.

It was late at night. One of Alta's splendid banquets had been in progress since the noon hour. The remnants of the bacchanalian feast, betokened the ribald nature of the entertainment.

Her guests had departed, with the exception of Solan Hai, who lingered—awaiting the commands of this woman who governed him, as well as all others who came within the radius of her authority.

The queenly beauty was seated in an alcove, adjoining the hall. A magnificent robe of velvet and ermine enveloped her voluptuous form and trailed across the costly rug at her feet. Before her stood the wizard, Solan Hai, in an attitude that savored somewhat of dejection, evidently he was not in the favor of Alta at this time.

"I must retire," she said wearily, without looking at her companion.

"Rest may be necessary to thee, my queen. It must be that thou art fatigued. Yet, methinks, nothing could add to the luster of thine eyes," replied the wizard.

"A compliment from thee, thou arch fiend, is something to dream upon," she sneered. "Solan Hai!" as

with sudden inspiration, "thou must introduce me to the king!"

Solan Hai shook his ugly head.

"Since the death of his wife, Mariamne, it is hard to approach the king. His majesty hath no heart for womankind."

"Think'st thou to make me believe that? Did he murder her to show his love?" cried Alta.

"Hush!" exclaimed Hai, horrified at such audacity.

"Dost thou suppose I fear such an old, decrepit, antiquated mummy as Herod!" said Alta coarsely. "Tell him it is my will—he shall come here."

For the first time in their acquaintance Solan Hai hesitated. Alta understood.

"Promise me this, as my good night," she whispered.

"At the first opportunity I will endeavor to satisfy thy wishes," faltered Solan Hai. "By the way there is another, in whose welfare thou hast expressed some interest."

"Who may that be, pray?" she asked, surprised.

"Caius Panthera hath returned to Jerusalem," he announced quietly, watching the changing color and expression of the woman as she heard mention of the name.

"In Jerusalem?" she murmured, leaning forward, a soft light in her eyes.

"He hath been here for the space of a week or more," still regarding her closely.

"May I see him?" she breathed, coming closer to the wizard.

"When wishing other favors, thou dost command. For this man thou dost condescend to pray," he said, insinuatingly.

Alta sprang to her feet.

"What if I do?" she cried furiously, going toward the wizard. "My compact with thee was his safety." The words were fairly hissed into the ear of the man and her eyes blazed.

"Herod hath pardoned and restored him to the army. My part hath been carried out. Hast thou any cause for complaint?" asked the wizard coolly—unaffected by the storm of anger.

"I am *not* complaining, and thou would'st not have *dared* to leave thy promise unperformed. I also have carried out my agreement." Alta looked down at the man before her defiantly.

"Dost thou dare to threaten?" he demanded. "Thy stipulation was that no harm should come to him. I will continue the compact. But—" he paused looking full into her face. "Thou must not play me false. I know thy love for this fellow, and thou know'st that he is already wedded; that he is the husband of Mary of Nazareth, the daughter of Joachim."

The woman clasped her head between her hands and moaned.

"Thou must dismiss this infatuation," exclaimed the wizard, vehemently. "See—I will be to thee what he could never have been—thy slave!" The huge creature fell on his knees before the woman, grovelling on the mat at her feet.

She lifted the folds of her robe, drew them away from his touch as though they would be contaminated. She turned, making no attempt to conceal her disgust, and threw herself again upon the divan. From here she looked at the cringing Hai, contempt curling her lips, and fury glinting from her dark eyes.

"Arise," she commanded. "Let this scene end. I have had enough of it. I wish to retire."

She struck a gong that swung near. Solan Hai quickly regained his feet, as a number of maids appeared.

"Good night, my lord," she said, in the sweetest tone at her command, as if nothing had occurred to disturb the even tenor of her mind. At the same time she held out the tips of her dainty fingers that Solan Hai might touch them with his lips. She shuddered at the contact.

"Thou shalt call to-morrow," she said graciously, "and behold the return of luster to the eyes thou dost admire," she murmured aside, as she passed out with her attendants, "Good night, slave."

Solan Hai ground his teeth in rage as he departed from the house. His soul was in torment; he loved Alta Gatzor. A wild masterful passion possessed him, its madness urged the fever of desperation through his veins.

He walked into the valley separating the mountains of Jerusalem, and betook himself to the home of Costa. Stamping up the steps he struck the door a furious blow with a staff he carried.

The timbers vibrated from the shock; the sound echoed through the scantily furnished building. Solan Hai waited a moment, then he pulled at the latch; it yielded to his touch and he moved forward into the darkness of the interior.

"Costa, my good Costa!" he shouted, "Costa, awake, I say! Thou sluggard, thy master calls."

He waited in the darkness, and listened to the sound of some one moving about. Presently a light appeared from the back of the house. It was in the hand of "good Costa," who came forward hastily.

"What would'st thou, master?" he exclaimed, on

seeing who had disturbed him. "Thou art out late of the night."

"Thou hast truly spoken," answered Hai. "I come for thine assistance. Where can we go that we may be undisturbed?"

Costa turned to a room at hand, held the light above his head, that its rays might show the way, and waited for Solan Hai to move past him into the apartment. It was a bare place with no opening save the door by which they entered and a hole in the wall which served the purpose of a window.

The wizard seated himself on a rickety chair. Costa drew a bench before his master, settled his half-clad body on the hard seat, placed the light beside him and gazed into the face of his companion in crime.

The two men remained in this position for a short time before Solan Hai came to the business that brought him to Costa. The latter watched him narrowly and saw that he was troubled.

"The king hath strange notions of late," said the wizard, at last. "I can scarcely comprehend his humors."

"Quite likely," was the non-committal reply of Costa. "Kings are privileged in such matters. Would that we all were kings."

"That it not the thing most to be desired," said Solan. "I have been the recipient of many favors at the hand of the king. What concerns me most is the manner of gratifying his demands."

"One good turn deserves another," remarked Costa. "What doth he require of thee?"

"He believeth that thy master is possessed of a familiar spirit," grumbled Solan. "That I can summon the dead, and such like stuff."

"Well—" observed the cautious Costa.

"A strange fantasm hath seized his mind," continued Solan. "Death is staring him in the face—he knows that it is inevitably near. Mariamne, whom he dispatched, is always before his clouded vision. He insists that, being a wizard, a necromancer, I must have the ability and power not only to converse with the dead, but to raise the departed so that he, too, may see and commune with them."

"Well," said the sagacious Costa. "Surely thou can'st perform a small matter, such as that."

"Dost thou mock me?" Solan glared into the face of Costa with angrily knitted brows. "Bah!" he continued. "Thou know'st better. Let there be no jesting between us."

"Whence cometh all thy power and knowledge, if thou hast not a familiar spirit, and can'st not commune with the unseen?" asked Costa.

"All fraud, trickery, deceit—dammed deceit. Fraud, beginning, end and middle; nothing but fraud!"

The wizard brought his fist down on his knee, so violently that the light wavered and all but flickered out.

"I am informed," said Costa carefully, "that the average man, not excepting kings, is fond of being deceived, that he doth not object to lies and that he loveth deeds of darkness. It may be that thy deceiving is to the king's taste. Mayhap, therein lieth the reason for his liking of his friend, the wizard."

Solan Hai watched Costa with discriminating attention during the delivery of this suggestive speech. He was not altogether pleased with the penetration displayed by his rascally associate.

"I did not come here to reason along these lines,

neither do I care to do so," he said finally. "I must hold his favor and he insists that I exert my power over the dead, and raise Mariamne, the wife he—"

"Killed," concluded Costa boldly, as Solan paused.

Again the wizard scowled, but he did not comment on the daring of his confederate.

"The madman hath intimated, pretty forcibly, that I must obey his commands in this respect, or I may find a residence somewhere within the walls of Antonia," admitted the wizard, his anxiety exhibiting itself in more scowls.

Costa uttered an exclamation, and seemed lost in thought for some time.

"Thou hast come to thy servant for counsel and advise?" he asked at last.

"Thou hast said," replied Solan, studying the cunning face before him.

"Thy servant can assist thee in the matter," announced Costa. "Trust me I will deliver thee from all thy fears."

"If thou can'st perform that service, thy master will not soon forget," and the speaker leaned forward in agitation, hoping that Costa spoke truly.

"Can'st thou answer for the assistance of Alta, the daughter of Gatzor of Hebron?" inquired Costa.

"I presume so," answered the wizard. "What of her?"

"She is the express image, both in face and figure, of the dead queen Mariamne."

"And if that be true, what of it?" said Solan.

"Did'st thou not say that Herod must needs see his dead queen?" asked Costa. "Answer for Alta. The rest is easy. She must personate Mariamne."

Solan Hai comprehended the project.

"How dost thou know that Alta resembles the dead Mariamne?" he inquired doubtfully.

"During the lifetime of the queen, I served for years in her house," exclaimed Costa impatiently. "I was struck with her resemblance to the queen the first time I met Alta Gatzor. I tell thee, the likeness is complete."

The wizard jumped to his feet.

"By the gods, thou hast solved the problem," he cried in a voice of intense satisfaction and relief. "The king shall see his Mariamne."

"Will the daughter of Gatzor consent to the imposition?" asked Costa, considering.

"No doubt of it. She dare not refuse," answered the wizard.

"Let her but be willing, the rest will take care of itself," remarked Costa.

"This very night she requested a meeting with the king," said Hai, unwisely telling secrets in his elation at the scheme. "She will enter into the deception with a will. There is nothing she would not dare undertake. Besides"—viciously—"I hold the means of compelling her." The wretch rubbed his hands together gleefully, at the thought of the new triumph he would win. He blinked his eyes, his face widened, and a sardonic grin of supreme confidence in the result of the plan upon the credulity of Herod swept across his visage.

"Think of the power it would give us over the mind of the king," ventured the man, Costa, after a silence, during which Solan Hai paced the little room, too much pleased to speak. He wheeled about, as Costa spoke, and looked sternly into the face of the impudent rascal.

"Us," he drawled slowly and fiercely, "who in Satan's name is—us?" his eyes flashed with displeasure.

"Thou art presumptuous. Remember, Solan Hai hath no rival, shares with none, acknowledges no partner."

Costa made haste to crave pardon for his unfortunate speech.

"'Tis enough," said Solan Hai to the suppliant. "Thy reward shall correspond in magnitude with thy service. The value of thy suggestion is not lost upon thy master."

The peculiar emphasis on the last word did not fail to impress the slave. Neither did it subdue the storm of mortification that raged beneath the servile exterior of the man. He closed the door behind the wizard and stood still, listening to the sound of retreating footsteps as they died away in the distance.

"Step aside, slave," he muttered to himself. "No interference. Thy suggestion shall be rewarded as thy master sees fit. Wait, Solan Hai, thou may'st be nearer Antonia than thou would'st care to know." The gleam of hatred in Costa's eyes boded no good to the wizard. "The proverb 'every dog shall have his day' is none the less true because of its age," he thought, and shuffled off to bed, where he dreamed of revenge.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE SEANCE—NECROMANCY.

"Thou hast magnificent apartments," was the comment of king Herod, as he moved along, supported by Solan Hai and another, to a seat prepared for his majesty in the supper hall of Alta, the daughter of Simon Gatzor.

The place bore no semblance to its customary appearance. The tables had been removed and the walls covered with new hangings, priceless rugs were strewn about the floor, and furniture that would have adorned the palace of any king was displayed.

Across one end of the room hung a heavy curtain of silken texture. This was the occasion for a trial of the wizard's reputed power and ability to raise the dead.

"Everything thou dost behold was procured for thy pleasure, that thy poor servant might aspire to entertain his benefactor," said Solan Hai, in reply to the remark of the king.

Herod's eyes wandered over the sumptuous arrangements for his reception.

"Thou art reported to be as rich as any at Jerusalem," he said, reflectively, looking keenly into the eyes of the wizard. "Is it true?"

The wizard was struck with misgiving. If he should answer in the affirmative, the king might wish to become his debtor. He knew that loans were easily effected on

the credit and security of Herod, so he refrained from his usual bombast and answered humbly enough.

"Thy servant is very much overrated, but what he hath is always at the disposal of his friend."

"I will remember thy loyalty," answered the king, "I stand in no doubt of thy sincerity."

The hour was in the silent watches of the night, fit time for the uncanny doings. The pretentious wizard had insisted that the king comply with certain conditions and restrictions, that would insure immunity from detection in this contemplated cheat, for it would, of course, be surrounded with all the senseless display attendant upon these deceptive manifestations.

With skillful care and patience the king had been tutored into complete submission to the directions of the wizard and his assistants. His receptive mind had been completely impressed with the belief, that, in order to appreciate the supernatural phenomena which he might witness, perfect harmony should exist between himself and the medium through whom these manifestations were to become real. He understood that without this absolute passiveness on his part, no satisfactory results could be hoped for. Thus, actuated by desperate longing for the beautiful princess, whom he had never ceased to mourn, he surrendered himself to the keeping and power of Solan Hai, and entered upon the mysteries of this midnight seance.

After the king was reclining on the couch prepared for him, all the lights in the room were extinguished, with the exception of two small ones that burned dimly immediately back of where the monarch rested. Herod looked up at the fantastic shadows, flickering on the high arched ceiling, and the chill of awe went over him.

Again did Solan Hai admonish him to "trust in the

power of his obedient servant' no matter what might develop, for this was to be a meeting between the living and the dead."

"Thou shalt see, oh, king, a number of persons from the other shore. It would be a favor to thy servant if thou would'st describe thy beloved queen." The wizard bowed low before his master, who, for the first time regarded him with undisguised suspicion.

"Beware! Solan Hai," he thundered. "There must be no chicanery. Thou shalt not dare to inquire as to any thing which might give thee advantage in this matter."

The king raised himself so as to look full into the face of his companion. The wizard met the gaze without so much as flinching.

"Such requirement hath not been made of any sooth-sayer since the days of the prophet Daniel. Be patient with thy servant, oh, king!" the wizard said, bowing again to conceal the grin that distorted his features. The king had fallen into the trap.

"There must be no jugglery," said the monarch, sternly.

"It grieves thy servant to the soul, that the breath of suspicion should come from his gracious master," murmured Hai. "Art thou ready, or would'st thou that we disturb not the unseen?"

"Proceed!" exclaimed the king, energetically. "It is my wish, I command thee, redeem thy promises. Prove thy boasted power."

The wizard advanced to the silken curtain. It swelled like a filling sail, and parted in the center. The space beyond lay in impenetrable darkness, intensified by the dim light of the wavering flame near the king.

Solan Hai waved his arms above his head, as if to implore some unseen power.

A moving sound, as of winds whistling through the place, answered the motions of the enchanter, the silver tinkling of a bell followed, and died away.

Herod sat upright, eager expectancy and hope made him alive to the slightest sound. A noise, as of untuned stringed instruments, greeted the hearing. It grew in volume, gathering discord after discord until it reached a pitch unbearable to the nerves of Herod and impossible to describe.

This continued until the king cried out in alarm. The wily conspirator immediately ran back to his dupe and fell prostrate before him, begging him to be patient and fear not; imploring him to preserve the conditions; assuring him that these signs were propitious; that the heavenly visitors would surely condescend to satisfy his majesty in every particular. Solan Hai remained before the king while the distracting roar lessened, falling to sweet strains of harmony that gradually filled the air.

Herod lay back again among the soft cushions and furs, the dreamy music had soothed his fears. As one enraptured he listened—the melodious waves vibrated through the room.

Trumpet blasts roused the monarch, clear liquid notes, thrilling; soul stirring. Herod succumbed to the spell of his own superstition. He no longer questioned the power of Solan Hai.

A rumbling, as of distant thunder, replaced the music. Clouds of smoke rolled from the dark recess and fitful jets of flame illumined the vapor. The odor of fragrant incense impregnated the atmosphere. The

king abandoned himself to the intoxicating effects as one who, after weary days, finds rest.

Flames danced across the dark space. At first they gave little light, but they brightened, and the king sat up again, with bated breath and staring eyes, for, beyond the smoke and flames a form became discernible. Another and another appeared before his fixed gaze, floating through the misty vapor. Some of the forms were beautiful to behold; others grotesque and hideous beyond description.

It was whispered to the king that no alteration of the conditions must occur. That no sound from inquisitive human kind must mar the materialization, else the queen would be hindered in her attempt to manifest herself to the king.

Herod remained motionless; fear and expectation held him speechless. Solan Hai was now convinced that there could be no danger in allowing the well arranged spectacle to proceed.

"She comes! she comes!" shouted the wizard. "Let every head, except the king's, be bowed." He threw himself on the floor as he finished speaking, and the attendants bent their heads in obedience. Herod strained his eyes in an agony of yearning, as he watched the space beyond the curtain. The forms disappeared, the murky vapor grew white, back of this, the light turned rose color. All at once, as a vision, appeared the beautiful form of a stately woman. The light increased, showing full upon her handsome features. Transparent garments floated about her, and to the enthralled senses of Herod an ethereal creature moved.

Again the enchanting music was wafted to the ears of the king; the light beyond the curtain changed to intense whiteness, and Solan Hai arose from the floor.

"Herod, 'king of the Jews!' " he cried. "Behold thy queen!"

Overwhelming joy transfigured the face of the king. It was she, the wife he had loved, whom he had caused to be murdered through his jealousy.

Once more he beheld the beautiful arms of his lost mistress extended toward him. The spell, that had held him, was powerless now. He sprang from the couch, and rushed toward her.

"Mariamne! Mariamne!" he cried. "My love! my wife."

Instantly a discordant noise crashed through the room. Before the king had taken three steps forward, everything was enveloped in impenetrable darkness. The remaining lamps were dashed to the floor. All was confusion and uproar. Pandemonium reigned in the place.

The king sank to the floor, wringing his hands, and moaning aloud in grief. When the servants brought lights they found the wizard face downward among the rugs, where he lay for some time as one dead.

"Costa! . Costa!"

"Here am I, mistress."

The man, Costa, answered the summons of Alta Gatzor, the reckless, successful actress in the recent imposition. He entered the room where she had resumed her customary attire. The discarded clothing of gauzy texture still littered the floor.

The excitement, of her achievement, glittered in the eyes of the woman, her face was flushed and her bosom heaved, she still labored under the nervous strain.

"Are they gone?" she questioned eagerly.

"Every mother's son of them," was the reply, "the wizard hath accompanied the king. He is making the most of his success."

"Is the king completely deceived?" asked Alta.

"Not the remotest doubt of it. Solan Hai is in high glee," answered Costa.

Alta's eyes flashed.

"By all the powers," she cried, excitedly and wildly, "his triumph shall be of short duration! The wizard is in my power. As he hath done to others, so shall it be doled out to him."

Costa heard the venomous threat with astonishment, and he realized, with lively apprehension, that for some reason, Alta hated the wizard.

"Have a care, my mistress," interposed the cautious retainer. "The king will not forgive, if he discover that he hath been fooled."

"He will forgive all except the contemptible author of the deception," declared the woman. "I will not hesitate. Thou wilt help me. I must act—act at once. I will undertake the management of the undoing of Solan Hai; assume the whole responsibility; accept all the blame. Trust thy mistress to smooth the troubled waters, in whose billows the wizard shall drown."

Costa looked admiringly at the daring creature before him.

"Thou would'st rush into certain danger," he said. "Perhaps thou dost not understand the extent of Solan Hai's power. Let not thine anger and hatred involve thee in indiscretions."

"Thou hast spoken well, my Costa, thou art faithful and thy counsel is not thrown away. Yet, thou must arrange a meeting for me with the king, either at this

place or in his palace. After that I will act independently. It must be done at once."

"What would'st thou do?" asked the man, in alarm at the energy of Alta.

"I will expose the deception to the king. Crush the wizard," said Alta in a low voice that thrilled the hearer with horror, so vindictive was the tone.

"'Tis a desperate undertaking. Thou wilt not betray thy servant?" said Costa uneasily.

"Not a hair of thy head shall be harmed." Alta looked somewhat contemptuously at the servant. "Is it not a common cause? Dost thou not, also, despise Solan Hai? Thou hast reason. Trust me and do not fear."

Costa still hesitated.

"Hast thou considered the danger and the risk?" he ventured.

"I certainly have," exclaimed Alta, impatiently. "I am determined to destroy the wizard, or be, myself, destroyed. Hark thee—tell me, Costa, what said he to the king before they went away?"

"Thou know'st that Solan Hai had taken much wine," began the man apologetically, "his tongue was loosed and he boasted to the king of his wonderful power; pretended that what had been seen was but a small matter; promised marvelous results in the future; the king could scarce brook delay in resuming the mysterious experiments, but Hai insisted that his energy and strength were exhausted by the act of the king in springing toward the queen." Costa bent in comical homage as he uttered the last word, but Alta was in no mood for trifling.

"The wizard thinks he will recover his wasted strength in about a week," Costa said.

"Dost thou mean that the king hath been promised another visitation?" she demanded.

"Thou hast said," answered Costa, "another visitation from the unseen world."

"And what more was promised his majesty?"

Costa's face reddened.

"I may not have heard all that was promised," he said, evasively, "and I would not shock thine ears, my mistress, with what a blatant drunkard might utter."

"By the God of Israel, thou shalt keep back nothing?" cried Alta, in a furious passion. "Tell me everything!" she commanded, coming close to Costa, "every jot and tittle!"

"The passion of the king is inflamed to madness at the thought of the possibility that he may again fold Mariamne to his breast. Thou know'st that Solan Hai would skillfully use this longing to his own ends," said Costa. "The most exacting conditions have been agreed to by the king. Death is the penalty held as the result of the slightest infringement on the rules laid down by the wizard, to which the king hath agreed to submit, and to which, he hath promised most implicit compliance."

"Go on! There is more of this," screamed Alta, grasping the man by the shoulders, and glaring into his frightened eyes. "Go on! What hath Solan Hai promised the king?"

"That thou, my mistress, shalt again appear before the king; that after he hath beheld thee, in the light, and is assured that thou art truly Mariamne," Costa lowered his voice. "The king is promised thy company for the space of two hours in total darkness. For the accomplishment of this thing, the king hath solemnly agreed to protect this great prophet in Israel, safe in all his pos-

sessions, and to add to them many shekels of gold, as an offering to the spirits who delight in ministering to the wants of Solan Hai, and, who will assist him in maintaining the conditions that will make this possible."

"The dastard!" exclaimed Alta. "He would use, and sell, even me, just as he does every other creature within his power. We will outwit him—but, my good Costa, thou must promise me one thing before thou shalt leave my presence, that thou wilt keep good faith with thy mistress."

"With all my heart and soul, I promise thee that," said Costa heartily.

"Wilt thou arrange the meeting I mentioned, with the king?" she questioned.

"I will do so at the earliest opportunity. In some way thou shalt gain audience with him. I will go about the matter at once."

Costa no longer hesitated, like every one else who fell within the sphere of her influence, he worshiped this radiant creature.

"Then thou may'st go," she said softly; holding out her hand to the man. He seized it and falling upon his knees covered the soft white fingers with kisses. Then he arose and respectfully backed out from her presence.

Alta threw herself across the couch. Shame and mortification struggled within her for mastery. She had lent her beauty to further the schemes of Solan Hai for the control of the weak, superstitious mind of the king, with one only purpose before her; that of furthering her own designs, but she had not counted on insult to her womanhood. She had believed that the wizard held some respect for her sex; and she gave over the hours of the night to anticipations of revenge.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE KING'S VISITOR.

"Let the woman enter. If her message be so important, then I will give her audience."

Herod spoke to one of his attendants, who was prostrate before him. The slave arose, and departed to convey the order of the king. At the same time, two eunuchs took their places between the couch, where the monarch reclined, and the doorway where the expected visitor would enter.

The king occupied the room in the palace where he passed his afternoons when desiring to be alone. The couch was placed near a large latticed window commanding a view of the gardens without; and the splash of waters dripping from the fountains fell musically on the ear.

The drapery of the couch was artistically embroidered and gorgeous pillows were heaped upon it. Elegantly carved seats of ivory, and ebony tables stood about, and the floor was covered with skins entire, the claws being gilded. Vases of beautiful flowers stood everywhere; and graceful ornaments of alabaster were scattered through the apartment. A peculiar, indescribably fascinating charm reigned over the apparently careless arrangement of these various objects.

Above the king's couch was a canopy of polished wood, wonderfully inlaid with malachiti and so carved that the impression of lace was given the beholder.

Tassels of gold and silver hung from the points of the carving. The walls were draped with tapestry of crimson and gold, and the ceiling was of burnished brass, beaten into non-descript figures.

This day the king was in a gracious humor. The intrusion was not unwelcome. It might afford him interest, or amusement, he cared but little which. At the least intimation of anything disagreeable, he could dismiss both the woman and her grievance—should it prove that she had one.

Having thus rapidly arranged the matter in his mind, his majesty was kindly disposed toward giving ear to the suppliant, a woman who had earnestly craved his attention, claiming that the person and honor of the king was the subject of which she would speak.

She had been bold and persistent—characteristics admired by Herod in women; she did not, would not, accept the refusal, given by the chamberlain, but had demanded that a personal interview with the king be granted her. This had a charm for Herod. It was out and beyond the ordinary happenings of the day, and, in consequence, commended the woman and her mission. What had most astonished him was the report that she was disguised, a cowl covering her features, and that she utterly refused to give her name.

Every precaution was taken to protect the king from hostile molestation. The eunuchs were powerful Ethiopians, always in readiness for any emergency—besides a company of body-guards, commanded by a centurion, was within easy call.

Herod was secure. He knew it. There was not the slightest danger that he would not be the full master of the situation.

A moment, and the curtain was lifted. The usher

stepped aside, and the veiled figure of a woman entered the room. She wore a long robe of costly material but dark in color and of studied simplicity. There was no betrayal of fear or hesitancy in her manner, but she did not remove the covering from her face. She went directly, though slowly, to a position before the king. She appeared unconscious of herself, but nothing in her exterior was unpremeditated, and the noble form, in the plain gown would have been certain to attract attention anywhere.

She paused before Herod, bowed her head and sank to her knees, remaining mute and motionless in his august presence.

"Speak!" exclaimed Herod, gazing at the cowed figure. "Speak! What so urgent as to bring thee before the king?"

"I come to seek thy pardon, oh, king! To expose and make known to thee a wicked imposition which hath been practiced upon thy majesty, by one who hath gained thy confidence through cunning deceit."

Clear and low the voice of Alta Gatzor fell upon the ear of the king.

"If thy face be as beautiful as thy voice is musical, thou art already pardoned," said Herod.

"While thy servant liveth, the compliment shall never be forgotten," murmured the voice.

"Remove the cowl, that I may behold thy features," commanded the king in his blandest tones.

"Thou would'st not be impatient should'st thou be disappointed in the comeliness of thy servant?" questioned the woman.

"My word for it," said the king, reassuringly.

"Remove the covering."

The visitor proceeded to do as she was requested.

Rising to her feet, she loosened the cowl and allowed it to fall to the floor. Undaunted, motionless as a carved statue, she stood with her dark, luminous eyes fixed steadily upon the king.

His careless glance became riveted, he stared as one demented into the gloriously beautiful face.

"Heavens!" he gasped rising from the couch, "I have seen that face before. Woman, I command thee, tell me where?"

"At the rendezvous of the reputed wizard of Jerusalem, Solan whose surname is Hai," answered Alta in her most winning tones.

The king continued to gaze at the woman.

"And thou," he began, "thou art—"

"I am Alta, the daughter of Simon Gatzor, of Hebron," she said composedly.

"Make known thy mission," commanded the king, scarcely able to control his voice.

"I am come to expose the wicked imposition, that hath been practiced upon thee by Solan Hai," replied Alta deliberately.

"By the powers that guard us, thou shalt have opportunity!" cried Herod energetically. "Dost thou refer to the meeting two nights ago?"

"I do, oh, king,"

"I half suspected that I had been deceived," said the king, with a groan. "Alas! It may have been thee whom I saw. Is it true?"

"It is true," conceded Alta.

"Be seated, and at rest."

He motioned to a seat, and one of the eunuchs placed it instantly at the disposal of Alta. These attendants might have been black marble statues, for all the interest they evinced in what was occurring. At a signal

they now retired. Alta's object was attained, she was alone with the king.

She accepted the almost unknown situation with equanimity. To be seated, a stranger, in the presence of the austere ruler was a rare privilege. Only to favorites and distinguished guests did Herod so unbend. Now he feasted his eyes, with unconcealed pleasure, upon the voluptuous creature before him.

"I see it all," he said slowly. "Thou art wonderfully like her—my lost love. Mariamne thou art gone, my soul, my life; doubly lost to me in that I had thought to see thee again. This woman is but thine image—a shadow."

The suffering king turned his face downward among the cushions and wept, in an agony of impotent grief and despair.

"Thou can'st not know how hard is this disappointment to bear," he said at last, in a broken voice. "I forgive thee, Alta Gatzor, but, thou shalt keep back nothing. Thou must tell me all."

"Most willingly will thy servant do so," Alta replied. "It is said that I am somewhat like thy lamented queen."

"Thou art the very embodiment of her, as I knew her first, the likeness is wonderful. She was truly a queen, easily touched by the sorrows of others, ever ready to hear the cry of distress—brave and considerate."

The king left his place and strode about the room endeavoring to control his emotions. He returned and stood before Alta.

"Thou may'st take her place—thou wilt let me drink in thy beauty," said the king, in a voice of terrible intensity. His face was white and his lips of ashen hue.

"I will dream her soul into thee, I will adore thee as the reflection of my life's love. I will listen to thy story—tell me all. I am weary of perfidy. Do not attempt to deceive me. Let the spirit of my love, for the lost one thou did'st personate, possess thy soul. Thou shalt be given such power, such triumph, as no woman in all Israel dare aspire to reach. See, the king, who may command, is at thy feet—relate thy story, leave nothing untold."

The vehemence of the king frightened even Alta Gatzor, but her splendid audacity served her well and she told all the particulars of the cruel deception. She saw her way to a place that would be the envy of Jerusalem, and her most ambitious thought had been the downfall of Solan Hai. Every word she uttered advanced her in the favor of the susceptible king, her winsome manner conveying open sympathy to his tortured mind.

When she had finished, he sat for a long time in silent contemplation. The veins of his face were swollen, the heavy brows drawn in a malignant frown, every feature betokened the most furious anger and hatred.

"I have long despised the presumptions of this Hai," said the king at length. "He hath been my secret adviser, in whose judgment I trusted, and to whose counsel I listened—to his advancement and my own peril—as I now believe. He shall no longer have a place in my esteem, but, for a few days, I would that thou continue on friendly terms with this wizard, until I shall be able to conjure up an adequate punishment for his crimes. Mayhap thou, too, dost not bear him any too good a will.

"I hate him!" she hissed.

"It is well," said the king. "Thou may'st whet thine appetite, for methinks I shall afford thee ample opportunity for revenge. Thou may'st depart. I would be alone, but when thou dost return, Herod will have that to say to thee, that will make thee the proudest woman in Israel."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE REFINEMENT OF TORTURE.

"Solan Hai, the wizard of Jerusalem, friend of the king."

The announcement was made by Herod's chamberlain. The personage named entered, accompanied by the two Ethiopians, who walked on either side of him. They arrived at the farthest end of the long room where sat his majesty, Herod, and paused. The eunuchs assumed reclining positions on each side of where the monarch looked down on the visitor.

The room was, in many respects, similar to the one in which the king had been entertained on the occasion when the supposed Mariamne had appeared. The hangings were arranged in the same way, even to the curtain, heavy and opaque, drawn across the end of the room opposite the king. The floor was bare and polished so that it reflected like a mirror. The draperies about the seat of the king were of exquisite texture, fine linen, threaded with gold. The latticed windows were provided with inside shutters, firmly closed, and the room was lighted by numerous lamps at the sides.

Solan Hai had heard the summons of the king to this interview with much misgiving. Fear was foreign to his sturdy nature, but, he dreaded the questions as to his occult powers. However, he was well prepared for inquiries, long practice and immunity had given him confidence in his ability to ward off suspicion and con-

ceal subterfuges, notwithstanding the most searching investigation.

The uncertain realm of the supernatural presented an obtuse problem, knowledge of which was exceedingly limited. This strange freak of cunning and duplicity, known as the "wizard of Jerusalem," found it an ample field for the display of his peculiarities. He surrounded himself, and those whom he desired to influence, with enforced conditions and unrelenting restrictions.

If the manner of the king was any index of his feelings, Solan Hai had nothing to fear. There was naught in the face of Herod that conveyed ought but the kindest regard for the man standing in his presence. If he was indignant, or mortified, or angered he gave no indication of either, and, if he had any resentment, it was hidden under the most bland and cordial demeanor.

"I have sent for thee, my friend, because none other hath done the works thou hast performed. Not even Daniel, nor Aaron, nor Moses. Thou art truly the friend of the king."

The welcome came smoothly from the lips of Herod, and Solan Hai allowed every misgiving to take wings, as he listened to this greeting. Bowing low before the king the wizard answered:

"Most gracious sovereign, it is the pleasure of thy most unworthy servant to live only in obedience to thy will. Peace be unto thee—the Lord's annointed."

"Thou art the greatest in Israel," said the king. "Slave—a seat for one who soothes my troubled mind."

One of the black attendants placed a seat at the right and slightly in front of Herod. The wizard accepted it and, lifting his snaky eyes, looked into the face of the king.

"Nebuchadnezzar commanded that an oblation and

sweet odors should be offered, and he made Daniel a great man, giving him many gifts, and rule over the whole province of Babylon. In after years Belshazzar clothed this same Daniel with scarlet, put a gold chain about his neck and made proclamation, concerning him, that he should be the third ruler in the kingdom. Am I right?" The king earnestly scanned the face before him.

"Thou art right, oh, king!" replied Solan Hai, with a glow of satisfaction that tingled from the soles of his feet to the roots of his hair.

"Moses and Aaron did many wonders before the king of Egypt. It is also recorded, that a woman, at Endor, raised Samuel from the dead," continued the king. "Are these things true?"

"Could the king doubt?" modestly inquired the wizard.

"Not after what mine eyes beheld while in thy company. Thou art greatest of them all."

A steely tone had stolen into the voice of the king, Solan Hai noticed it and a strange terrified feeling sent a shiver through his body.

"It was a small matter, oh, king," he said quietly.

"Say'st thou so," said Herod, "and hast thou recovered thy usual energy?"

"To a limited extent," answered the wizard, cautiously.

"Thou did'st promise that again I should behold that vision. The week, for which thou did'st stipulate, is nearly past. On the morrow would have been time for the redemption of thine agreement. Surely to one, great as thou, a few hours could make no difference. Look about thee. See what I have prepared."

The king waved his hand toward the back of the

room, and the wizard took a hasty survey of the place. For the first time he noticed the curtain swinging across the farther end.

"I invited thee to be all alone with myself. We will invoke and conjure together. The invisible will be revealed to us. Thou shalt practice thine art. The king will be thy pupil."

Thus, as the wild beast caresses the prey soon to be devoured, did the king toy with his victim.

In all his long experience and acquaintance with Herod, the wizard had never known him to speak in this manner. A flush of excitement, or anger, was creeping over the face of the king, and Solan Hai felt that the gravest danger of his life threatened, yet, he looked steadily into the gloomy eyes of Herod and answered collectedly :

"The king requires a most extraordinary thing. No magician can teach. Their gifts are given of the gods, and not to be acquired by man."

"When did'st thou discover thy marvelous gift?" asked Herod.

"It is the earliest recollection of thy servant," replied the wizard. "Such things are born with those to whom they are given."

"Thou can'st not lose this wondrous power?" said the king.

A flush akin to the color that dyed the face of Herod appeared on the cheek of the wizard. He could ill brook this questioning with its hidden meaning. For a moment he lost sight of the danger, and anger predominated the tones of his voice as he answered shortly :

"Such queries I have never discussed with mortal man. Thy servant only knows that the power is within, and only works under proper conditions."

The king took no heed of the sullen countenance of the wizard.

"Name the most exacting conditions!" he exclaimed. "Thy king will furnish every requirement and place it at thy disposal. My soul longs for further display of thy power. Go within the curtain yonder. Examine carefully the room. Come! do not hesitate."

Solan Hai had recovered his self-control.

"I go, my king," he said, rising, "because thou dost command."

He passed to the curtain, did examine it closely, and the room beyond. He looked keenly at the floor and felt the walls; both were bare and smooth. His investigation revealed nothing—absolutely nothing—back of the curtain. But the scrutiny gave him time to think and plan. To gain time and put the king off was the burden pressing on his mind.

"Is all as thou would'st desire?" inquired the king, as the wizard, after delaying as long as he dared, came forth.

"Everything is adjusted as might be required," replied the perplexed Hai. "But, thy servant can not answer for the conditions. To tempt the unseen may bring frightful disaster to both of us."

"Or one of us," added the king, in a tone so significant as to alarm the wizard.

"Oh, king, have patience!" cried Hai, driven to his wit's end. "Thy servant will explain. The powers governing the spirit world must be propitiated by fastings and supplications."

"If that be so the conditions have been complied with," asserted Herod calmly. "Since the time I beheld Mariamne, at thy residence, have I not eaten meat, neither hath wine passed my lips—and my soul hath

been so troubled that sleep hath forsaken my eyes. Do not disappoint thy king. I command thee, proceed."

In sheer desperation, no other available excuse offering itself, Solan Hai turned his face toward the curtain. At a signal the Ethiopians extinguished the lights, save the two that flickered weirdly behind the couch where the king reposed. The incantations of the former exhibition were repeated—all in vain, the curtain remained immovable, and the wizard protested that under the existing conditions his efforts must remain futile.

Notwithstanding all the resources, with which he was gifted, it was not quite clear to Solan Hai how he was to satisfy the king and extract himself from the unenviable situation. He watched the changing humor of the king, who was playing fast and loose with him, and almost despaired of satisfying this seeker after the hidden mysteries of the beyond.

As effort after effort of the wizard passed without the slightest manifestation of anything like success, and no answer came to the desperate invitations and beseechings of the thoroughly wearied imposter, Herod began to show signs of impatience.

"Stand aside!" he exclaimed, abruptly. "Thou shalt take my place. I will take thine."

"Not so, my king!" cried Solan Hai, almost persuaded that the king had lost his senses.

"But I say, it shall be so!" promptly replied the king stepping toward the curtain. "Seat thyself. Thy master shall try."

Hai had nothing left but to accept this challenge and await the disappointment of the monarch, whom he now believed to be actually mad.

His majesty passed slowly to the center of the floor

motioning toward the closed curtain, meanwhile stamping violently. The heavy curtain swayed, parted and moved slowly aside. A rumbling, as of the tramp of horses' feet, shook the room for a moment and died away. Sweet strains of music were borne to the ears of the astonished wizard. He sprang to his feet and started forward. The king turned:

"Dare'st thou break the conditions?" he stormed.

At the word Solan Hai felt his wrists grasped by the eunuchs, his giant arms were pinioned, held as if in a vice. The wizard could neither move forward or back.

Again the king turned his attention to the work before him. He lifted his arms above his head and waved his hands in perfect imitation of the gestures employed by the wizard.

Sweet incense, fragrant odors and perfumes permeated the whole room. The king paced slowly backward, past where stood the eunuchs and their prisoner. He ascended the steps of his resting place and sank upon the cushions.

"Move forward, somewhat, thou may'st better see if thou art a little closer," said the king, and the eunuchs led Solan Hai a few steps nearer the curtain.

"Mark well the conditions, oh, wizard of Jerusalem! Thou may'st be assisted in thy future incantations," continued the king.

This bit of sarcasm was the first intimation Solan Hai had of the real disposition of the king, and it was not lost upon the impostor. He was well aware that he might expect no manner of consideration, clemency, or mercy at the hands of offended dignity. He braced himself for any calamity and resolved to betray neither curiosity nor fear.

"With exercise of the gift within thee, thou, oh

king, shalt outrival even Daniel, or, the famous lady of Endor." He answered back firmly and promptly.

"This night shalt *thou* outrival Hamon!" retorted the exasperated king. "Thou hast digged a pit; into it thou shalt fall!"

"So be it, oh king! And I will return to teach thee that gods rule, not men."

Solan Hai had succeeded in having the last word. The superstitious fear of Herod was aroused. Notwithstanding his conviction that the wizard was not what he pretended to be, and that unmerciful deception had been practiced, the dread of that unknown, under world, where demons dwell, was securely held in the make-up of the men of the time, and the king was not exempt. The threat of the wizard struck terror to the heart of Herod. It was a bold, masterly stroke, and inspired a spirit of apprehensive fear in the mind of the revengeful king. Yet, he did not hesitate, had he wished to do so, his plans were so well laid, that it would have been weakness to turn back.

The curtained place took on a luminous aspect. Volumes of vapor poured from the recesses. Forms flitted to and fro, forward and back, seeming to grow up from the floor, before the dilating eyes of the wizard, as on a former occasion. Some of them were white robed, while others were veiled in black. They took up a line and marched in single file toward where the wizard and eunuchs stood. They all circled about the three men silently, except that as they passed, every one of them whispered some epithet of opprobrium into the ear of the wizard. He gazed at the scene like one petrified, realized his standing with the king, and, without once giving intimation of the anguished working of his thoughts, bore this torture with great fortitude.

During these marches and countermarches the king had time to collect himself. He watched the spectacle of the moving forms, and a feeling of his own strength returned. His decision was confirmed and he became encouraged in his purpose, besides, the novelty of this form of amusement was a positive pleasure.

The spectres gathered, in grim array, at the sides of the center opening. The vapors grew thin and a pale light appeared in the recess. A halo of color encircled the actors. Even to the condemned onlooker the irresistible charm of the picture was felt.

The king arose and clapped his hands three times.

"Alta!" he called dramatically. "Alta, daughter of Simon Gatzor, the merchant of Hebron!"

In a moment, seemingly in the twinkling of an eye, the beautiful Alta, robed as queen Mariamne, came into full view, languidly floating among the clouds of vapor, which now slowly disappeared, revealing the woman, radiant with almost unearthly loveliness.

She raised her rounded arm and pointed a delicate finger to where the wizard stood.

With a superhuman effort, the maddened victim wrenched himself free from the grasp of the eunuchs. If there had ever been, in the life of the infuriated wretch, one disinterested thought, or sentiment, it had been in the love he bore this same splendid creature, who had betrayed him, and accomplished his downfall.

In simple justice it should be said, that the promise, to the king, had been made without the least intention of fulfillment, and in acquiescence to the desires expressed by the monarch.

He understood now. She had refused him the kindness she showed the servants, even while she recklessly accepted the bounty he lavished upon her. She would

become the mistress of the king, he thought. It should not be. In desperation he sprang toward her—it was but a step.

Crash—every light went out. A heavy body dropped to the polished floor; it was a solid partition coming from above and sliding into place, just between the curtain and the frantic wizard.

“Lights!” cried the king. “Lights!”

From the adjoining apartments a number of retainers filed in, passing on either side of the king, taking places about the room. They bore lighted torches, and the king was found seated on his couch. The eunuchs bore the unconscious Solan Hai forward.

They laid him near the center of the floor, with his head toward the king and his feet extended toward the partition wall that had taken the place of the curtain. They then assumed their usual positions at the feet of Herod. All the other actors, mundane or heavenly, had disappeared.

CHAPTER XXVII.

CHAMBER OF DEATH.

The features of Herod wore a dark and sinister expression as he regarded the insensible rogue at his feet. The blackness of night was in the glance of his keen old eyes, and from his heart pity was as far removed as the east is separated from the west.

He was painfully alive to the fact, that, for a long period past, the wizard had used his pretended powers as a screen for crimes, and that during this time the schemer had so ingratiated himself with the king as to use his majesty in the aid and furtherance of nefarious and diabolical transactions.

That Solan Hai was, in all probability, much worse than a cheat and swindler, Herod was convinced; moreover, the wizard had the reputation of being one of the wealthiest men at Jerusalem. This, of itself, was no small matter, and weighed heavily in the scale against Hai. A golden opportunity was offered for the serving of a double purpose; to get even with the man who had deceived him for a lifetime, and to seize the ill-gotten gains of the deceiver. The day of reckoning had come, the king would not pass it by. He had decided to make brief the disposal of his hitherto trusted servant.

The torch-bearers proceeded to relight and adjust the lamps. Never one of them so much as looked toward the man lying on the floor. Severe training had taught them to evince neither surprise nor concern at

what they might behold. Their service finished, they filed from the room, apparently as oblivious of the scene they had witnessed as though they had been mere machines, moved and directed by an unseen power.

The wizard gave indications of returning consciousness. He turned on his side and emitted a groan, as if in a spasm of pain.

The indomitable Herod rose to his feet.

"Lift him up," he commanded, "something to restore and nourish him. I am not through with the seer of Jerusalem."

The black men went about the executing of these orders with dispatch. Strong drink was quickly procured, the head of the prostrate man was raised, and the cup pressed to his lips. A few drops of the liquor trickled into the mouth of Hai, and his throat became moistened. The fluid revived him almost immediately. He reached forth eagerly and, grasping the cup, drained its contents to the dregs. Dropping the vessel and clasping his head with nerveless hands, he staggered to an upright position.

He gazed about in bewilderment and exclamations fell disconnectedly from his faltering lips. With an effort he gathered his scattered senses, and the objects about him became familiar. Mind and memory asserted their sway. Looking up at the king, as if to assure himself, he met a stony gaze of indignant anger.

"Thou son of perdition, can'st thou answer?" fumed the king, without attempting to disguise or smother his resentment.

"Softly, softly, most gracious majesty!" murmured the oily ruffian, in his most insinuating tone, "such language does ill grace the tongue of the king, who rules by sufferance and permission of Augustus."

"What mean'st thou, churl?" Hotly rejoined the king.

"A dog may suffer at the hand of his master—may be kicked, smitten, cuffed and cursed, yet, will the poor cur gladly lick the hand that dealt the blows. Think'st thou thy servant is a dog?" cried Solan Hai, unable to restrain his passion.

"No!" answered the king, unutterable scorn vibrating through his tense tones. "No, thou art no dog. Far be it from me to insult such faithful kind by liking thee to the lowest cur that crawls the gutter and exists upon the offal. Enough! Thou shalt not banter words with thy king, who holds thee over a pit much as he would a loathsome reptile cringing and twisting above a flame."

"Thy servant might have craved thy mercy, even for a fancied offense, if he had thought thou had'st knowledge of such a quality," retorted Hai, with a reckless sneer on his ugly lips.

"Silence thy tongue!" thundered the king. "Did'st thou have mercy when ruthlessly tearing open the wounds of a broken heart? Did'st thou remember ought of pity when thou did'st awaken the smoldering pangs of the soul and conscience of thy king? Answer me, thou scorpion! Tell me of thy mercy, when thou did'st make of me a shuttlecock and plaything through accursed witchery and lying wonders."

Solan Hai regretted his hasty defiance of the king. He would fain have conciliated the outraged monarch.

"To what thou dost refer, I am at loss to understand," he said slowly. "Thou dost darken counsel by thy riddles. I cannot comprehend. What put thee in this frame of mind? Why rail at thy minister, who hath served thee long and well?"

"Cease this argument, thou whited sepulchre," ordered the king. "Persistence in deceit, coupled with a lying tongue, doth but add insult to the injury of already irreparable wrong."

The bitter accusation stung Hai to further insolence.

"It is meet thou should'st prove before venturing to accuse," he said deliberately. "I, also, am a subject of Augustus."

"If so?" said the king.

"Thou wilt not dare to harm a hair of my head, oh king, without proof of thy wanton charges. I will depart. Thine ingratitude hath deprived thee of the best among thy counsellors. If there be ought against me, thy faithful servant and retainer until this present moment, that could have given thee offense, it should be charged in public and so proven. When thou hast fairly considered the issue, methinks thou wilt not push this matter further."

"So, before the people of Jerusalem, thou would'st make of thy master a laughing stock. Every contingency hath been duly considered. Even now, thine habitations are in the possession of my trusted officers. Thy retinue of servants, spys, robbers, assassins, all thy minions, are by this time safely confined within the friendly walls of Antonia, from whence none shall ever come forth, save and except, those who may best suit the purposes of the king. They cannot escape, neither can'st thou, oh seer of Jerusalem, hope for release."

"Would'st thou add another murder to thy many crimes?" asked the victim.

The speech was unfortunate. Again the fury of the king blazed forth.

"Inch by inch—piece by piece—with less compunc-

tion than I'd feel in the smiting of a serpent, would I kill thee," snarled the monarch.

"Then I may expect neither mercy nor consideration at thine hands," said Hai boldly. "Thou know'st not the meaning of justice. Already I am condemned. Proceed, executioner."

"Thy marvelous presumption and audacity amaze me," said Herod. "Thou shalt be confronted, face to face, with witnesses."

"Thy threats become thee, oh master of ceremonies," was the contemptuous reply.

"Less of bravado might have prolonged thine existence," rejoined the king.

"I neither fear thine anger, nor trust thy promises," coolly answered Hai. "Do thy worst and utmost. There will be a day of judgment."

"So far as thou art concerned, that day is come," was the uncompromising retort. "Behold thy confederate and accuser."

Herod stepped backward to his couch and leaned against the framework of the canopy. At the right, the curtains, concealing an entrance, parted, and Alta Gatzor, still arrayed in the diaphanous draperies, in which she had impersonated queen Mariamne, stepped from between the folds.

The wizard darted one swift glance in the direction of the woman. He saw the air of triumph, plainly expressing her relentless disposition toward himself, and he knew that he was within her toils.

"I understand and divine, oh king, how cunningly thou hast been deceived," Hai exclaimed in a changed voice. "How we both have been cruelly wronged and outraged by the Jezebel, standing at thy side. I see it all! I see it all!"

Receiving no answer to this adroit attempt to turn the tables upon the woman, whom he was convinced had become his mortal enemy, he ignored the look of disdain with which she was regarding him and continued.

"This woman is the most skillful sorceress and witch in all Judea. She is the author of all our trouble, oh king! Having in her treacherous mind the purpose to destroy thy faithful servant as a rival for thy favor."

Solan Hai looked hopefully at the king. There was no misinterpreting the open hostility of Alta.

"Thou art the Alpha and Omega of all lying hypocrisy, and the consummation of all villainy!" she exclaimed, angrily.

Solan Hai gazed, spellbound for a moment, into Alta's beautiful face. He saw, in her, the fire that was consuming his dearest aspirations, and he saw, too, the beauty of the flame. Her power, he had never surmised; she had won the confidence of the king; she was greater than he had believed.

"Say on—" he exclaimed as she paused. Then as Alta declined to reply, he continued:

"Trust her not, oh my king! In time she will be thine undoing, as this day she is mine. Listen not to the voice of the siren. The volubility of her tongue is equaled only by her power to deceive. She will lure thee to destruction. Behold, on my knees I implore thee!" He fell prostrate. "Let thy servant be heard," he pleaded. "I have been cruelly deceived by her sorcery and led to believe in the return of thy wife from the dead."

"Monster of iniquity," replied the king, "again hast thou outraged the truth."

Hai sprang up in a fury.

"Send for my butler," he hissed. "He had charge of Alta Gatzor's house. Send for her father, he will explain the conduct of this woman. She is the accomplice of Panthera." Hai entirely forgot himself in his rage. "Panthera," he repeated, "who was the companion of Joachim, the rebel and conspirator. Thy majesty will remember this disturber; the soldier, whom thou did'st degrade."

"But, thou did'st speak well of him. In the consideration of his case, thou did'st crave my forbearance," answered Herod.

"Truly hast thou spoken, most gracious king," replied Hai, earnestly. "It was a price insisted upon by this woman. I was to protect her lover, she, in turn, was to deliver into the hands of thy servant all the other conspirators. Instead, she hath taken this cunningly devised plan as a means of overthrowing thy servant and deceiving thyself."

The king seemed not to give ear to the words of the wizard.

"Let Simon Gatzor be produced," he ordered.

This cringing, fawning wretch, the father of the gloriously beautiful Alta, walked from behind the curtain, or rather, shambled out, for it appeared impossible for the poor whining sycophant to lift his feet; more especially was this characteristic marked, as he shrank back from before the clouded countenance of his old master.

"Simon," the wizard fixed his compelling eyes on the frightened man, "Simon, my good Simon, speak!"

"Silence," interposed the king, "he shall speak for himself, and without interruption. Go on Gatzor!"

Simon Gatzor shifted his weight from one foot to the other and back again.

"Well—" he began, "well, it is quite true, my daughter, Alta, hath always been a wayward child." The man twisted his long bony fingers together and drew his ungainly shoulders up until they seemed to rest against the back of his head. All the time he gazed, as though fascinated, into the intent face of the wizard, who returned the look with an intensity born of hope. "Still, she's my child! My little child! My God! My only child!" In dread lest harm was to come to her the head of the poor father sank forward, and tears of pitiable anguish rolled down his furrowed cheeks.

Hai took a quick stride toward where the man stood. At a signal from Herod, one of the stalwart eunuchs passed between the wizard and the man, Gatzor.

"I must have knowledge of everything between thyself and Solan Hai," said the king, addressing the broken tool. "Go on my man. Tell me thy story."

"Father dear, tell the king all. Be not afraid." The silvery voice of his beloved daughter, encouraged the weeping man. He lifted his head and turned fully toward the king.

"I was a small trader, a very small trader, in the town of Nazareth, where I was born," he commenced, humbly. "We were happy, my wife, my child, and myself. One day this man, Solan Hai, darkened the light of our little home. Since then I have been only a slave, his dog. He opened up to me questionable schemes whereby wealth and riches flowed into my hands. The first step was easy, and when I had yielded to the first temptation, another quickly followed. There could be no receding, no turning back. At last crime was added to my misdoings, and I was completely in his power—my life, my home, my property, my God, my

family, my child. He demanded of me, that she should come to Jerusalem to live—he told me it was her wish—she said it was. As long as I dared, I resisted this. He had placed me in business in a large way, a merchant and trader in the town of Hebron. He threatened to ruin me if I did not consent to the arrangement. He promised to marry my poor child—she seemed to be willing, and, oh king, she came to the city. We could not stay behind, her poor mother and I, we followed her, and lived here in great style and magnificence—all furnished by his hand.” The voice of the speaker shook with fear and emotion and grew shrill as he excitedly continued: “She had been very poor all her life, dear little girl. Have mercy on her, and on her poor, old, broken-hearted father.”

In abject grief and despair the dupe of Solan Hai threw himself on the floor, at the feet of the king.

“Arise!” commanded Herod, “be seated here,” pointing to a place near Alta. “Let the butler be called.”

Again the curtain parted and Costa came forth. The wizard gave one swift look, and knew Costa would say nothing that could be used to extract him from his awkward dilemma.

Without hesitancy the trusted confederate of Solan Hai proceeded to expose the dual life of the wizard. He related the history of his intercourse with the king's friend, for the last twenty years. The king listened; Solan Hai scowled. There could be no answer; the acquisitions were overwhelming; the evidence was complete.

“’Tis enough!” cried the king, interrupting the tirade of Costa, who could have consumed the entire night with denunciations. “Alta Gatzor, thou may'st remain.”

Simon Gatzor and the garrulous Costa retired imme-

diately, and Solan Hai stood alone before his deadly enemies, the king, whom he had betrayed, and the peerless beauty, who had used him as a stepping stone to the favor of Herod.

"Solan Hai," spoke the king. "Prepare to die."

"I am ready," was the grim answer.

The Ethiopians seized the wizard and half carried him backward to a diamond shaped figure inlaid in the smooth floor. They left him there, and he stood erect, seemingly careless of his surroundings.

"Alta, thou queen of beauty and love," exclaimed Herod, "be at rest, and behold the vengeance of thy king."

He made room for her and she sank into a place on the couch, near enough to have touched the skirt of his garment.

"With thee, alone, is there mercy for him," continued the king.

"With me, there can be no mercy," Alta said vehemently. "My heart finds no pity for such a monster. He is not fit to cumber the earth. If thy power can compass it, let him die."

"It is said!" pronounced Herod solemnly.

The floor of the room shook slightly. There was a whirring, rasping sound. The face of Solan Hai was set and stern. A black scowl, of hate and fury, lowered his heavy brows, and his eyes snapped with venom, that found expression, as he looked at the tableau before him. Alta, radiantly lovely, seated on the very couch of the king.

A sudden jar, the section of the floor, on which the wizard stood, dropped, bodily, for a distance of several feet. For the first time, a look of consternation betrayed the fear of the seer. He started forward to gain a foot-

ing on the part of the floor in front. It was swinging slowly downward, revealing a dark line of space between him and where the others were seated. He hastily faced about. Back of him was only the blank partition wall, that had fallen before the curtained recess.

Scarcely an instant passed before he realized his predicament, and perceived the danger. The portion of floor, on which he found footing, was now, also, bending rapidly downward, making an incline so steep that it would be impossible for him to remain much longer in an upright position.

A giddiness came over him, as the parting platforms separated, with their edges slowly, but surely, moving apart. He hastily estimated the width of the black chasm, now between himself and the other portion of the floor. With desperate energy, he gathered himself for the effort, and sprang across the yawning space. The distance was too great, and he found himself vainly endeavoring to obtain a grasping place on the smooth surface.

A bitter howl of rage emanated from his coarse mouth, followed by horrible imprecations and curses against his tormentors, who sat deliberately watching his struggles.

Like a flash of light, across the brain of the doomed man, came the recollection of the dungeons and reservoirs beneath the palace. For all their intimacy, Herod had never revealed to Solan Hai this trap floor. A dreamy, wondering thought drifted through his mind as to whether dungeons and years of confinement awaited him, or if his death struggle would be a battle with the chilly waters of the great slimy cisterns. In spite of every effort, the clutching grasp failed, and,

with a gasping, despairing cry, the unfortunate victim, of his own villainy, fell into the dark abyss below.

The floor, directly before the king, lightened of its load, straightened into place almost at once, the lowered portion rising slowly to its proper level. The noise of the upper movement, effectually shut out any sound that might have come from below.

Alta sat rigidly in her place, only the tense line of her lips indicating the horror that must have filled her being. She listened to the grating and grinding of the machinery that lifted the heavy timbers, until the edges of the floor struck together, and the last bolt shot into its socket, then she drooped forward and fell helplessly in a deathlike swoon.

Again did the attendants procure the strong drink. The arms of the king were folded about the unconscious woman in fondness and alarm. His own hand held the draught to her lips.

She recovered quickly, and lifted her hand weakly to her brow.

"Let us leave this place," she murmured. "Can he trouble us any more?"

"Never any more," answered Herod tenderly. And he gently conducted Alta from the chamber of death.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A STRANGE INVITATION.

Beautiful, queenly Alta Gatzor continued her career of splendid extravagance. After the disappearance of the seer of Jerusalem, and her acquaintance with the king, it surpassed anything she had ever attempted before.

Two eunuchs constantly attended her; anticipating every wish, executing her orders and obeying her every whim. Besides these, she maintained a retinue of other servants, and her pretentious mansion was the one most of interest in the new town.

Her gorgeously furnished apartments, with every luxurious appointment in perfect taste, were incomparably elegant, and evidenced, among her many wonderful elements of character, the ability to group countless costly furnishings with perfect harmony of color, and an appearance of exquisite simplicity.

The advent of this strange woman had astonished all Jerusalem. Her lavish expenditures distanced all competitors; her beauty and the magnetism of her presence, eclipsing even that of the famed queen of Egypt; or the equally remarkable sovereign of Sheba.

How, and from where, Alta Gatzor had come, were questions answered not at all. The members of her household were entirely non-communicative; they knew nothing; or they resolutely declined to refer to the matter.

She ruled her dependents with a despotic sway. They obeyed without protest. She was austere and exacting, yet all, who were admitted to her exclusive circle, became fascinated with her dark beauty. The adoration, so freely offered her, she did not value, and, save for the affectionate respect, with which she at all times honored her father and mother, she seemed devoid of the most lovable, womanly traits. Her conduct toward all others was in marked contradistinction to the consideration always evinced by Alta, when the welfare or happiness of her parents was involved.

The mystery of her household and movements continued to defy penetration, except in that she, herself, chose occasionally to lift the veil. She was a revelation to the people of Jerusalem; by her magic touch every avenue was opened and closed at will.

Even the king, when he could forego his baths beyond the Jordan, sought her side and spent much time in her society. Many perceived the likeness of Alta to the unfortunate, but beloved, Mariamne and, to this remarkable resemblance, the knowing ones attributed the partiality and favor bestowed on her by the "king of the Jews."

The distinction, conveyed through the flattering condescension of the king, was enough to give her place among the highest and greatest, if not the best, of the city.

The scandal mongers and sensation venders gossiped and whispered among themselves, and to all others who could be induced to listen to their cunningly devised innuendoes, that Herod was enslaved by the sorcery, and completely enthralled by the witchery of Alta Gatzor. In their estimation, this was true, not only of the king, but of all others who came within her influence.

She was a royal entertainer, and the guests, who partook of her generous hospitality, went away loud in her praise. For all the busy voice of prejudice and adverse criticism, the king's new favorite was soon advanced to a position that made her the envy of all her sex, and the sensation of the hour. Surprise at the sudden ascension to power, mingled with disapproval of her daring disregard of conventionalities, kept busy tongues employed with malicious discussions.

Panthera had heard much of the brilliant Alta; on several occasions, he met her at the festive entertainments where the king's guard was summoned to add zest to the animated scenes. Always, she bestowed upon the soldier, not only recognition, but also, her most winning smiles. On his part these friendly overtures were received with a grave courtesy that forbade familiarity. He was compelled, however, to acknowledge himself under somewhat of an obligation to the imperious woman, who did not attempt to conceal her preference for the distinguished looking Roman.

He remembered her bitter arraignment of the wizard, in the cave at Hebron; the passionate voice that had denounced her father's destroyer, and he had watched with wonder the apparent standing of the outlaw at the home of the Gatzors.

He knew that Solan Hai was his enemy, and he could not guess why the hostilities should cease. The wizard had become an unknown factor in the life of Panthera, since he was no more seen in the city. The soldier had missed him, it is true, but he did not care to inquire what had become of the seer. It was rumored, that this unique personage had been seen on the way from Jerusalem to Rome; that he was bound on an important mission concerning the king. Panthera did

not concern himself as to the truth or falsity of this report, having no disposition to pry into the affairs of so dangerous a foe.

With his mind constantly occupied with love for the amiable, affectionate Mary, he had small time for thought of Solan Hai, much less of Alta Gatzor.

Over at the little city of Nazareth, the wife of his choice waited for him, yet, in vain was his every effort to obtain a discharge from the service of Herod. Distinction and honor had been thrust upon him. He had been advanced in place and power, and the king had been pleased to notice and mention him with approval. In the discharge of his duties, which, of late, had been enlarged and had increased in responsibility, he had been commended.

Salome and Alexes had assured him of their combined influence with the king in obtaining the desired release, but disappointment was the only result of their efforts, until Panthera turned from their promises with a heavy heart, his oft deferred hopes creating a spirit of gloom and impending disaster.

Thus it was with Panthera, until, one day, he lingered in the palace gardens, as the sun disappeared and the shades of evening blended into the gloom and darkness of night.

Messages had come to him, through the constantly faithful Joseph. Between the lines and words, of loving tenor, he detected the presence of downright anguish at the procrastination. As time lengthened, this state of distress was aggravated, at last, it was too much to bear, and the suspense bordered on distraction.

Mary, soul of his soul, would he ever return to her waiting arms? "Living or dead I will return to thee," he had promised. How often the words rang out to his

weary brain. Heartsick and homesick, tonight he stretched his arms above his head in longing loneliness for the white cottage with its vines and shrubs; its dove cots and garden; its dainty mistress danced before his mental vision; he was lost in contemplation of the reunion at Nazareth, and his soul thirsted for its fruition.

A pitch torch shed a flickering glare of light over the scene before the soldier. Long and short shadows wavered in fantastic shapes over the flowers and grasses of Herod's lawn. Panthera abstractedly gazed through the light, into the murky darkness beyond.

Out of the misty shadows glided the spectre like form of a man, disguised in dark robes, and with covered features. He moved silently, and advanced straight toward where the soldier was seated. The new actor on the scene attracted the attention of Panthera and aroused him from the absorbing train of thought into which he had fallen. As he contemplated the advancing figure he could not repress a foreboding, that whoever it might be, he would be the bearer of something of interest and concern. The soldier felt his heart throb with anticipation; an indescribable impression, that he did not attempt to analyze, took possession of his mind—an assurance—that, on some former occasion, he had beheld the somberly clad creature.

As the figure came into the full rays of the light, Panthera felt a constraining sense of certainty that it was coming directly to where he was seated. Phantom thoughts of this character rushed through his mind.

The advancing form was lost to sight close under the torch, then, emerging from the shadow, quickened its pace, and stood before the soldier.

"Caius Panthera," spoke the man, confronting him.
"Wilt thou follow me?"

"Who art thou?" was the prompt question.

"The servant of Alta, whose surname is Gatzor," was the response.

"Where would'st thou lead?"

"To the mansion of my mistress."

"Why should I follow thee?"

"My mistress requests it. 'Twas she who sent me hither."

"Why doth she request my presence?"

"It is her will."

"For what purpose?"

The man shrugged his shoulders impatiently, but he answered civilly enough:

"Sir, I know not. Only she will tell thee."

"Should I refuse to attend thy bidding—what then?"

"Most certainly thou would'st offend, past pardon. My mistress would not soon forget such an affront."

"Thy mistress hath no right to demand my presence."

"Thou may'st speak truly, but her power should not be despised, nor her wishes denied. Wilt thou follow me?"

Panthera thought of the day when he had been the prisoner of Alta Gatzor; of her voluntary assistance in securing his escape, unmolested, from Solan Hai. Of her own accord, she had guided him to where Mary sojourned. Now Alta had influence with Herod—could it be, that she knew of his fruitless efforts to secure a discharge from the service? Was it not possible that again she had determined to intervene in his behalf? For the sake of the lovely Mary, herself, whom all

must love, the powerful favorite of fortune might have generously decided to aid the soldier. It was the explanation that flashed into the mind of Panthera, born of his own desperate longing. It was plausible—he dared not fail to avail himself of every hopeful opportunity.

He recollected her words, when he had acknowledged his love for Joachim's daughter, at the mountain entrance of the cave, and through the length of dreary weeks, he seemed to hear again the sound of her clear voice:

"Thou may'st trust me!" and "Alta will be thy friend."

He hesitated no longer.

"Lead on!" he said.

The stranger glided away among the shadows and Panthera, gathering his cloak about him with a swift motion, sprang to his feet and followed after.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE SORCERESS.

The gliding, muffled form kept a short distance in advance of the soldier. Without conversation, the two moved through the narrow streets of Jerusalem, down the incline, by way of the Cheesemonger's valley, toward mount Bezetha. It was later in the night than the soldier imagined. While indulging in reverie, in the garden of the king, time had passed without notice. The deserted streets were hushed into silence, broken only by the footfalls of Panthera and his guide, as they passed swiftly along the space allotted for travel—now beneath the stone archways, and again in more open spaces, where the glimmer of stars lent a faint light.

They halted before an imposing structure—the end of their journey—from within no ray of illumination found its way; no appearance of life was visible; it was the home of Alta Gatzor.

The guide laid his hand on the rail of an iron gate, touched a hidden spring, and the way into the court surrounding the mansion was open.

Panthera paused inquiringly as the guide waited outside the gate.

"Step in!" invited the messenger.

Panthera did so. The guide followed. A snap of the spring announced the closing of the gate, and the form passed forward across the court.

The forbidding walls of the gloomy looking building loomed tall and silent, as if waiting for some one to speak animation into their gray, cold depths. The guide, familiar with the surroundings, ascended a flight of massive stone steps, to a landing between two of the marble pillars of the open colonnade. In the dusky shade, this person found and opened a door, giving admission to the interior of the house.

"Enter!" was all he said to Panthera, who had accompanied him, without question.

The huge door swung shut, enveloping them in intense darkness and closing away the outer world.

The soldier waited for the voice of his conductor, it came not. In the darkness and stillness he became aware that he was alone. Suspicion of evil, for the first time, entered his mind. He feared the existence of some trap. In the impenetrable gloom he imagined a new presence near, but he remained motionless. The guide had left him when the door had closed, now, as the soldier grew impatient, a light appeared, and Panthera saw the muffled figure advancing quickly toward him.

"Come!" commanded the person, leading the way across a large semi-circular anteroom.

All the way, through the streets and while waiting in the obscurity of the lobby, the mind of the soldier had been struggling with the problem, where had he seen this figure before? He was following lightly up a carved stairway to the upper floor, when, suddenly, clear and as though it had been but yesterday, that it happened, there came to his memory the episode, at the gate of the city, when he had last left Jerusalem on his way to Nazareth. The cowed figure—its warn-

ing—unheeded at the time and during the happy days that followed.

He sprang forward with an exclamation, they reached the landing simultaneously, and, before Panthera could speak again, a sliding door opened, flooding the place where they stood with light. They entered a spacious apartment. It was the banquet hall, where the king had been entertained by the wizard with the spirit manifestations, said to have been from another world.

The eyes of the soldier swept rapidly over the scene before him. Every detail of magnificence was noted. The yielding velvet of the rugs rendered his step noiseless; the display of wealth and glittering grandeur was enhanced by myriads of lamps with colored shades.

Near the center of the room the guide stopped abruptly:

"Caius Panthera, of the Germans!" he announced and immediately retraced his steps, leaving the soldier a solitary figure, amidst the splendor.

At the side of the room the purple curtains of an alcove trembled, and were drawn aside.

"Thou art welcome, most excellent Panthera!" The voice was the well remembered one of Alta Gatzor.

Panthera turned sharply. Within the curtained alcove, lovely—flushed with pleasure—radiant, stood the speaker. One jeweled hand held back the folds of the curtain, the other was outstretched in glad greeting to the soldier.

"Thou wilt accept a seat, my friend," she continued, pointing to a divan before her.

Panthera bowed, with courtly grace, above the perfect hand and accepted the proffered seat.

Alta had slipped into her favorite reclining posture

on the purple draped couch. Her garment was the wonderful, transparent robe of gauze that she had worn when personating queen Mariamne. Her perfect throat and arms were bare, and the warm glow of health shone through the clear skin. From one slender foot the lace trimmed hem of the robe fell away, and the nervous tapping of the silken slipper alone betrayed of what moment was this interview to Alta Gatzor.

"Thou hast been most considerate to come at my invitation," she responded, watching him closely.

The charm of her presence, the tone of her voice, could not fail to place the man at his ease; but the frank admiration that spoke in his open glance was not the sentiment she had wished to arouse.

"It affords me much pleasure to place my services at thy disposal," he said quietly. "Command me."

"Know'st thou not why I have sent for thee?"

The crimson color mounted to her cheek. She sat up and looked directly into the soldier's upturned face. An alluring, wanton smile heightened and strengthened her beauty, and her dark eyes widened passionately.

Had Panthera been gifted with the intuition of womankind, he would have made a discovery that would have placed him on his guard. He would have seen that his hostess was seated in a position to avail herself of every advantage of light and shade in the display of her magnificent proportions.

He gazed, into her enchanting face and upon her voluptuous form, with all the ardor of unalloyed pleasure in beholding such ravishing beauty. She did not seem to take from her surroundings, rather, in his estimation, did she shed brilliancy upon them.

The costly robe, artistically arranged and skillfully designed to make the most of her figure, left every line

of her person full and distinct in marvelous, rounded outline. Beneath the lace-like, silken folds the movements of her graceful limbs and body were exposed. To the vision of the soldier, there was no mar or defect in the pose and picture before him, and his senses could not but do homage to the captivating woman.

Vases of fragrant flowers stood everywhere; their odors filled the atmosphere, and added a dreamy feeling of contentment and abandonment to the influence of Alta's absorbing fascinations.

Of all the men, who had sued for her favor, none had ever awakened, in the proud heart of Gatzor's daughter one throb of response; her life was bound up in the hope of one day winning the love of Panthera. She had determined on his subjugation. The more distant seemed the accomplishment of her purpose, the more intense grew her longing, until her very being was devoured with ungoverned passion. The price she might be called upon, and which she was willing to pay, was past computation—all, everything, was at his feet, within his grasp, under his control. He had only to reach forth and partake of the fruit forbidden. What if dishonor, shame—even death—followed? What was death to Alta Gatzor?

Would he not divine—behold her intent and purpose? No! Unaccountable perversity, he appeared indifferent to lascivious glance and wily flattery alike.

Panthera was trusting to his ingenuity to interest this woman, whom he knew to be a power at the court of Herod, in his plans for emancipation from the duties that prevented his return to the confiding, gentle Mary, who waited, longing, hoping for the soul comfort his presence would bring into her life. He labored under a serious misapprehension of the true situation.

"I have not the remotest knowledge of why thou did'st send for thy servant," he said in reply to her question, "except—" he paused and looked into her face.

"Except," she interrupted, taking up the word, "that I should be interested in thy welfare and advancement."

"Daughter of Gatzor," he exclaimed, "I came here with some such thought—'tis true. Thou art, perhaps, aware that, for some time thy servant hath been endeavoring to obtain an honorable discharge from the service of Herod?"

"I have been so informed," she answered coldly. "I knew, in fact, of thy first effort in that direction."

"And thou wilt assist?" he cried, eagerly springing to his feet.

"I will hinder," answered Alta, with flashing eyes. "Thou can'st not leave Jerusalem because I have willed otherwise. Pray resume thy seat."

The light died out of the soldier's face. He sank reluctantly into his former position, looking at her for explanation.

"Thou art astonished at my statement?" she continued.

"I am, indeed," answered Panthera sternly. "Why should'st thou oppose my dearest wish and hope?"

"Give me thy serious attention." She hesitated, in perplexity, as to where she would best begin. "From the time thou did'st first cross the threshold of my father's home, I have never known an hour of peace. Thy face, thy form, hath haunted me by day and by night—hath filled my visions. I fought this infatuation, this insanity, for I divined thy love for the maid of Nazareth, and had confirmation from thine own

lips. I hid myself from thee, denied myself the pleasure of thy company; prayed and agonized to be delivered from the overwhelming love that mastered me. All in vain. I could not break the silver chain binding my soul to the one purpose—the possession of thy regard and love.”

“Thou know’st not of what thou art speaking!” exclaimed Panthera in utter consternation.

All the art of the heart bent on conquest was to be brought to bear upon this man during the interview. Alta did not dream of failure in her undertaking. All men would yield; none were impervious to the blandishments of a woman, a capable woman, who, urged on by maddened desire, would not relinquish an opportunity to crush the loyalty of her victim. Panthera was only a man, she reasoned.

Although young in years, she was too experienced a judge of human nature, as well as of the man in her toils, to attempt weakening his confidence in the idol of his heart. She was not wholly lost to the sting of inward, conscious shame, as her active mind dwelt momentarily upon the course she was pursuing. Notwithstanding these recurring qualms she was not the woman to turn from a set purpose. Passion was master of discretion. As a result she desperately persisted in her assault upon the integrity and virtue of her victim.

“Thou art mistaken,” she answered him, calmly resolute. “I know everything. Thine every movement hath been under my surveillance. The restoration of thy place in the German company and the arresting of the king’s displeasure, was my work, through the wizard, Solan Hai. Thine advancement, to place and power, is within my hands. Solan Hai was thine enemy; would have destroyed thee, he is removed, forever,

from thy way. There is nothing that can separate us from happiness. I have both wealth and power—it shall be freely bestowed upon thee—all shall be thine."

"I implore thee, speak no more of this. There are insurmountable obstacles to all thou dost propose," interposed Panthera.

"Thou dost, perhaps, refer to thy marriage with the maid of Nazareth?" said Alta.

Panthera started, surprised.

"How did'st thou know of that?" he asked.

"I tell thee, I know everything of thy movements," reiterated Alta. "From the time of thy betrothal thou hast been under the constant, watchful observation of my servant. Thy marriage, at Nazareth, was well nigh more than my soul could bear. At that time I had less power with the king else would'st thou not have accomplished thy desire."

Panthera dashed his hand across his face. Tears of fond love, of hopeless yearning, for Mary of Nazareth, stood thickly under his heavy eyelids. He brushed them away. The unexpected mention of the relation he bore the maid was more than his overwrought heart could endure.

"Then thou wilt be gracious," he said. "Pity for a sister, one whom thou, thyself, know'st is the best, the noblest, the truest of earth, shall find a place in thy heart. Even now, the dawn of motherhood brings her fresh longing for the husband whom she blesses. See—on my knees I plead with thee. Thou hast power, thou can'st restore me to my wife. Without her, my arms are henceforth empty. Thou can'st do this thing. Place thy servant under a never ending obligation to thy goodness and generosity. A life of service shall bind me to thy fortunes. We both shall pray for thy

prosperity; shall heap blessings upon thy head; our child shall be taught to enshrine thee as a benefactress. Respect and honor shall take the place of that which thy unworthy servant hath kindled in thy bosom. When fortune's fickle hand shall be withdrawn from thee, I will render thee the strong comfort and protection of a brother. When the day of adversity and sorrow comes upon thee, I shall bear its burden. Upon me it shall fall and not on thee. Do not turn away! Give me thine answer!"

Alta turned from the impassioned face; put out her hand, as if to ward off the unwelcome pleading.

"I will never assist thee!" she said deliberately.

CHAPTER XXX.

ANTONIA AND OBLIVION.

This answer, delivered in a steely tone, carried convincing proof, to the mind of the soldier, that the woman would not turn from her purpose. He remembered that every effort on his part to bring the conversation to the matter uppermost in his thoughts, and nearest to his heart, had been skillfully parried and diverted. To sue for mercy, or hope for favor, would be equally futile.

Panthera rose to his feet, drew his form to its full height and waited.

"Dost thou think me cruel, in that I decline to lend assistance that would crush my dearest hopes?" Alta questioned.

"Thou can'st have no hope in this matter," replied Panthera. "I am the loyal husband of one true woman."

Alta's eyes fastened on the face of the man before her. For the allegiance he had sworn to another, she would have given life itself. In the beginning of the interview she determined that he should forswear his vows; that she alone would be the possessor of his love. Now she brought herself to make a proposition that would have been beyond consideration before.

"It is not an unheard of thing for a man to have more than one wife. It is the rule—is it not?"

For the first time a shade of contempt passed across the set features of the soldier.

"I have been a plain, simple man," he said, "and I have not cared to inquire into such matters."

"There is no law in Rome, or among the Hebrews, denying thee the right to take to thyself another wife," cried Alta vehemently.

"I am not versed in the law pertaining to these things," responded Panthera. "Knowledge of my own heart prompts me to say, there is only one woman who shall rule and control it, and she is already my wife."

The eyes of Alta Gatzor quailed before the steadfast gaze of the incorruptible man. Mortification and shame took hold of her, and her courage faltered. Then she remembered her power and returned once more to her purpose.

"Caius Panthera, beware!" she exclaimed angrily. "Thinkest thou I will brook the spurning of my friendly overtures?"

"If thou wert friendly, thou would'st act friendly," he said sadly.

"Never one word of consideration, or commiseration, hast thou bestowed upon me," Alta cried bitterly. "Like every other, of thy sex, thou art supremely selfish."

"Unkindness and injustice characterize thy charge," was the cold reply. "Far be it from me to injure thee or cause thee pain. I have offered thee all within my power to give."

"I refused and spurned thine offer of friendship. I do so again."

She paused, all the tense, drawn lines of her face melted into sweetness, the wide, dark eyes filled with an expression of unutterable love; in an abandon of misery, she threw herself at his feet, twining her bare arms about his knees.

"Do not turn me away!" she sobbed. "Let me be thy slave! Thy needs shall be anticipated; thy wants supplied. I am rich. All I own is at thy disposal. Thou art all the world to me. Do not spurn me. Do not remain so silent. Speak! Speak! Tell me that I may find a place in thine heart."

Panthera stooped to the weeping woman, lifted her to her feet. In a paroxysm of passion she flung herself on his breast. Claspings her arms about his neck, she rained kisses upon his face, calling him every dear name as she clung closer to him.

To the astonished soldier this demonstration was a revelation. He looked into the upturned face of Alta. The clear olive skin glowed with excitement, and her eyes glittered with the intensity of her desperation.

Panthera forcibly pushed her from him, held her at arm's length in an iron grasp.

"For the sake of heaven, what would'st thou?" he demanded. "Art thou lost to all shame? Hast thou forgotten thy self respect—thy father—thy mother! Let us part. We must do so. Summon thy servant to conduct me hence."

Alta shook off his restraining hands. With a mighty effort she governed her shaking voice.

"Never!" she declared. "Never! Thou shalt remain of thy free will, or against it, as thou shalt choose."

"Thou art mad," he said. "Calm thyself. Let this be forgotten; never mentioned in the future. Let me forget that I ever came here. Do so thyself. Again I say—I swear—I will be to thee a brother—a protector!"

"Thou art a fool," hissed the woman, forgetting herself. "I have weighed this matter carefully."

She stepped backward to the couch, where she had

reclined, and sank upon it as though exhausted. With a fixed stare she regarded the man. Anger and hatred mingled in the baleful look, so swiftly had her feelings undergone transition. Her love had been scorned; the temptation of riches had been offered without avail. Place, power and grandeur were no object to this extraordinary man; from her charms he had recoiled in aversion—even threats were lost upon him. It was too late to turn back, had she so desired; he should not escape; there could be no compromise between them. Hereafter they must be enemies, at least it would be so upon her part. She would not fail in her endeavors; he should be humbled, made to realize her might.

Panthera turned, as if to leave the apartment. Her voice arrested his movement at the first step.

“Thou would’st carry from my presence the story of my love; the crime of a woman’s heart against the modesty of her nature. Perhaps, among thy comrades, thou wilt make boast of thy powers; to while away an idle hour, thou wilt recount thy victory.”

The venomous insinuation stung the soldier to the quick.

“Not for worlds would I breathe a word of this scene,” he cried in swift indignation; “no, not even to my dearer self, the woman of my choice. I can trust that time will make us understand each other better, that thou wilt forgive the soldier, and forget that he ever crossed thy path—or give up thine unholy passion, and regard him as thy friend.”

He had meant to be generous, and Alta was convinced of his sincerity, but the mention of Mary crushed whatever of pity might have been left in the breast of the woman; it sealed his doom.

Henceforth Alta would be a demon, controlled by

embittered hate, the root of murder. Panthera instinctively knew this as he looked into her face, observed the dark, leaden shade that suffused her features, and gave to her beauty a tinge of malignant fury.

"Listen," she said in a low, dangerously steady tone, "to the last word of the woman whom thou hast dared to thwart—whom thou dost despise. I have power to cast thee off, to destroy thine every prospect and, at last, to take thy life. An hour ago, I loved thee. Now I hate, abhor thee. The earth is not large enough to hold us both."

"Surely thou would'st not have my blood upon thee!" exclaimed Panthera, horrified. "Thou know'st not what thou art saying. Thou art tormented by fear; consumed by rage. When the gentle soothing of sleep shall have lulled thee to forgetfulness, thou wilt arise with better, nobler thoughts. Cease this war of words. Let thy servant return to his place among men. If he may not count on thee as his friend, at least give him the privilege of forgetting that he ever looked upon thy face. I will go hence. No doubt, I shall find my way unassisted."

He moved peremptorily toward the door, when, as he was about to lay his hand against the panel, his arms were grasped and he found himself irresistibly forced back to the place where he had been standing.

The soldier recognized the two Ethiopian attendants. No sound had betrayed their entrance, or signified from whence they came, or the means used to summon them to the presence of their mistress. Not a word was uttered, they simply held Panthera, in relentless grasp, before the place where Alta reclined, a bitter smile of triumph on her handsome lips.

The wrath of the soldier was aroused. He could not

submit quietly to the outrage. With a superhuman effort he threw his hands up and, dexterously thrusting them forward, brought his assailants violently against each other. Their heads struck together, and they staggered from the blinding contact.

Taking advantage of their momentary bewilderment, Panthera reached for his trusty short sword, only to discover that it was gone; had been extracted from the scabbard, probably as he waited in the dark entry before ascending the stairway. This was a sore disappointment. Armed with this weapon, he would have had no fear of the outcome between himself and the two discomfited brutes. As it was, he knew he would be under serious disadvantage should they attempt further assaults.

The attendants recovered themselves, and looked first at each other, then glared at the soldier, who was slowly moving toward the opposite wall. They glanced at Alta, the same smile of unconcern curved the line of her mouth, but she did not speak.

The slaves lost no time, but rushed upon Panthera with the evident intention of seizing him before he could reach the position of advantage he was seeking. As the foremost reached the soldier, he received a blow, followed by a kick, that completely whirled him off his feet, and, at the same time, hindered his burly companion from advancing to a place that would allow him to render assistance. Before the dazed eunuch gathered himself for another attack, Panthera seized a heavy stone pedestal. Striking, right and left, he soon leveled the two huge specimens of humanity to the floor. With the unwieldy weapon, in his hand, he dashed through the door into the hall followed by the

two desperate and bleeding retainers. In the darkness a fierce and protracted struggle ensued.

Alta did not stir; she could not have done so. She listened to the sounds of the unequal conflict with varying emotions. She admired the fearless courage of the soldier and could not suppress the sympathy and concern that welled within her, as she longed to know of his welfare, neither could she forgive his refusal to listen to her appeals.

The order had been given, the eunuchs would certainly obey. She heard the hastily approaching footsteps of the other retainers; knew that Costa would soon come to the assistance of the Ethiopians. No cry for mercy came from the dark hallway. He would be overcome, and then—she staggered to her feet, swayed—fell back against the couch.

Presently she became aware that lights had been procured; that her servants were on hand to render aid to each other. She could no longer endure the suspense.

Rushing into the hall, she was in time to see Panthera lift one of the black men bodily and hurl him headlong down the stairs, while Costa, stealing up behind the devoted soldier, dealt him a treacherous blow with a bludgeon that felled him. The marble balustrade saved him from death on the stone floor below, as he rolled half way down the stairs after the luckless eunuch. Panthera was the helpless prisoner of Costa, and Alta Gatzor.

The victim was securely bound forthwith so that it would be impossible for him to offer further resistance. Alta watched these preparations coldly. At a sign from her the servants, awe stricken and wondering, lifted

the body of the black slave and silently carried it from sight.

Again Alta looked upon the face that had been her undoing. It was more beautiful, in the repose of unconsciousness, than she could have guessed. A wave of pitying love surged over her. She battled for mastery of her emotions, spoke a low word to Costa and vanished within her apartment.

Almost tenderly did the rascally minion apply restoratives to his charge. He ran to the outer door and set it widely ajar, that the cool night wind might fan the temples of the unconscious soldier. Slowly the life-blood coursed back through the benumbed brain of Panthera, a wave of feverish color trembled in his face. The strong arms, of Costa, lifted the prostrate man to his feet and supported him.

The cowl had been re-adjusted; the long flowing garment re-arranged. When Panthera opened his eyes he saw the same figure that had lead the way to this dread rendezvous.

"Thou must follow me," said Costa, from beneath the cowl.

"Lead on," answered Panthera, "any place is preferable to within these walls."

The chill of the gray dawn refreshed the weary soldier. He walked, for a time, unheeding the direction. Suddenly he knew, that close behind him, moved other forms, silent, unobtrusive, but there—doubtless to assist his guide, should occasion require.

They were moving toward the prison, Antonia. The captive pressed his hand to his throbbing brow, a delirium seized his senses. The outer door of the awful prison opened. He saw only the portal of Mary's home at Nazareth—he passed within—the guide bent toward

him and whispered:

"I warned thee once to 'beware.'"

Panthera started, realized his situation.

"I remember thee," he said. "It was at the north gate."

The man in the cowl nodded.

"Farewell!" he muttered. The dismal clank of bolts was heard, and the ponderous door shut Caius Panthera in—and the world out—*forever*.

CHAPTER XXXI.

EGYPT, INDIA—A VISION.

Time swung along, on the weary wing of expectancy, for Mary at Nazareth. Hope changed to despondency that bordered on despair, as she waited for the one who never returned. Alive or dead, he came not. Her heart ached, and her soul yearned in anxious, suffering suspense, for the comfort of the man she adored, the father of her unborn child.

His absence, at this time, was a great affliction, the calamity of her life, for which there was no consolation. Her faith, in his constancy, sustained her broken spirit and saved the golden thread, binding her to life and love, from snapping.

Patient, loving Joseph moved about his daily duties in a sort of pre-occupied silence. When Mary was not gazing at him, his looks dwelt upon her in pitying commiseration. The pallor of his face was only equaled by the pathetic whiteness of her own. The constrained, troubled cast of his benign features, betrayed his deep concern in the trial of his ward.

He knew not what had become of the soldier, and now it had come to pass that he did not mention the name of Panthera, unless it was first referred to by Mary. Notwithstanding the most diligent inquiries, and frequent trips to the city, he had been unable to learn anything which might account for the mysterious disappearance of Mary's husband. The friends of

Panthera were also mystified, they could only wonder and surmise the worst.

Another source of pain and mortification entered into the life of the sensitive Mary. The women of the place, not knowing the facts, were not slow in divining evil and insinuating wrong. This being the rule, time out of mind, they were, to some extent, blameless. What else could they think? They had not been called into the confidence of Mary and Joseph; no explanations had been forthcoming from any source. As a consequence, their curiosity was naturally aroused, and their suspicions, fomented by gossip and scandal, placed upon the acute edge of inquiry.

As time precluded further concealment of the delicate condition of Mary, these dames looked their virtuous horror, shook their heads, and remarked:

"We knew it! We told thee so!"

Thus went up a chorus of righteous indignation, the refrain, of which, penetrated the isolation, and reached the ear of Mary, whose burden was already more than she had strength to bear. Yet, did she not complain, or murmur at her lot. She could still afford to suffer reproach, if need be, rather than divide her secret with any, without his permission and sanction.

Panthera had thought it wise, not dreaming that the separation would be for more than a fortnight, to leave the matter of the marriage unknown, lest the king, in his unreasonable prejudice, might refuse the release from service, to the husband of Joachim's daughter—she would wait.

Again it was spring in Judea. A year, or thereabouts, had passed since the eventful morning when Panthera, the Roman soldier, came into the camp of Joachim with his warning from the sister of the king.

On the pastures of Galilee the shepherds were tending their flocks, and the day closed in, with peace and quietness reigning in all the region round about Nazareth.

Night came to Mary—a night of darkness and the shadow of death. She entered the gates of dissolution, and in sorrow and travail, brought forth a son.

The mid-wife came because she saw a brightness about the cottage, and she wondered whereof it shone. This woman's hands were light, her movements prompt and efficient, and her presence soothing. She it was, who fanned back her sister into life, and comforted her with the whispered story of a man born into the world. Mary forgot her agony for joy and held the precious babe close to her breast, murmuring endearing messages to the innocent newcomer concerning the father not there to share with her, in the unspeakable delirium of pleasure.

Joseph was nigh through all the distress of the night. He heard the music of the child's first cry, and it fell upon his ear as never sound had done before. The appeal of that wailing voice touched the innermost depths of his soul. His heart went out to the defenseless creature, and he loved the babe and made him welcome.

When the mother had fallen into deep slumber, Joseph set out again toward Jerusalem. To bring the soldier home, to restore him to the wife and complete her happiness was his mission. The gray dawn saw his departure, and the dusk of evening shadowed the white cottage when he returned.

Mary heard the sound of his entrance. She turned her wan face, flushed and hopeful, toward the kindly man who approached her bedside.

Joseph bent his head.

"I bring thee no knowledge of him," he said sadly. "Among all those who knew him, not one could tell me more than we already knew."

Mary did not speak. She turned her face away and, under the long lashes of her closed eyes, Joseph saw the tears stealing. That moment he made a vow unto the Lord, that henceforth he would be to the child, a father, so long as he should live. Should the soldier never return, he would give the remainder of his life to the adoration of the mother and the service and love of her son.

"The Lord Almighty hear my vow, and keep me faithful!" he exclaimed, smiting himself on the breast and looking heavenward. A voice came back in immediate answer:

"'Tis a covenant between thee and me. Remember thy vow!"

Joseph was sore afraid, for he heard the voice, but saw no person. When he came to himself he was astonished, for there was none other in the house, except the woman who waited upon Mary.

As the hours passed by, his affection grew for the helpless stranger, who nestled so quietly in the arms of his mother, and he again strengthened himself for the new responsibility that had come to him.

On the eighth day the child was circumcised, and dedicated to the service of the most high God.

Mary made a vow, that, if the child should be spared to her, she would raise him in the fear of the Lord, and in the knowledge of the law, from his youth up. In this obligation Joseph voluntarily joined her, in the synagogue, before Annas, the priest, who registered

and witnessed these vows, as made by Mary and Joseph.

It came to pass that Mary was again strong. Daily was she seen in the temple of God. In prayer and supplications, fastings and thanksgiving, the greater part of her time was spent.

The child grew and waxed strong, a pride and comfort to his mother. Some of the other mothers in Israel envied Mary the interesting child, who grew more beautiful as the age of understanding dawned in his mind.

About this time Mary had a vision, as she slept, and, behold she saw the father of her child, and with him other persons, whose raiment did shine with a brightness as of the noonday sun. And an exceeding great light filled the room wherein lay the babe and his mother. Mary was not afraid, but welcomed the heavenly visitors and hearkened unto their voices, giving heed to their words.

Above the couch where she rested, bent the beloved face of Panthera. Eagerly she lifted the little one, that the father might behold the perfection of his child, and, as she did so, she heard the music of the husband's voice:

"Mary, my life, be not afraid. Comfort thyself—for I have seen thy sorrow and know of thy constancy. Take our child and flee into Egypt, for there are those who would take his young life."

At these words, spoken in the familiar tones, Mary became frightened because of the warning. Grasping the babe in her arms, she shrieked out in her excitement, and instantly the vision faded.

Joseph rushed to the room, as did, also, others, hearing the cry of the mother. When they were come into the apartment where she was, they found her sitting

upright, with the babe strained tightly to her bosom.

She requested all of them to leave her, save her guardian. When they were all gone out, Mary told Joseph all her vision and he was sore perplexed. He looked at the woman in doubt—fearing that her trouble and weakness had unsettled her reason. But Mary persisted in the assertion that she had seen the spirit of her husband that she had received a message from him, although she had been spellbound and amazed so that she remained speechless in his presence and the presence of those messengers, whom she had seen in his company.

Nevertheless, when Joseph had pondered the thing Mary related, he counselled her not to mention the vision to any other person.

And yet, in that very same night, Joseph, too, was warned by an angel in a dream, to take the child and his mother, and fly into Egypt, there to remain until he should be commanded to return to Galilee.

Now Joseph was a devout man, and was not unmindful of the heavenly message, but set about the matter of his journey with all haste.

Afterward he, with Mary and her child, sojourned in the land of Egypt. Joseph worked at his trade, of contractor and builder, and was well regarded and respected by the Egyptians, so long as he remained a 'stranger within their gates.'

The little family lived in the humble manner befitting their straightened circumstances—for nothing of Mary's rightful fortune had been recovered—all of Joachim's wealth having been absorbed into the coffers of Herod—and the young child and his mother were entirely dependent upon the care and means of the faithful Joseph.

When they had been several months in the land of Egypt, they were one day seated at the door of their tent, at the going down of the sun.

Across the space, before the humble abode, moved the stately form of a priest from the temple of Isis. He approached and bowed himself low before Mary and her son, saying:

“Blessed woman. Peace be with thee.”

Knowing the holy office of the man, by his garb, Mary saluted the stranger with kindly greetings, and Joseph did constrain him, beseeching him that he would partake, with them, of the evening meal. Being persuaded, the priest tarried at the tent and ate of the meal cake and the lamb that had been prepared by Mary.

When the priest had been refreshed, he spoke to Joseph and said:

“Behold, in thy servant, a man who is a worshiper of the true God, a minister and teacher, a magician and soothsayer, as were his fathers before him, time out of mind, for many generations, since the time when Abraham dwelt in this same land.

“Fastings and prayers have been meat and drink to thy servant since his earliest remembrance, and now, the whiteness of age is upon him and the experience and wisdom of years. Thrice hath an heavenly vision come unto thy servant, commanding him to find one Mary and her guardian, Israelites, sojourning in this country, and bid them welcome to the temple of Isis, near by the great and holy river of God.

“Thy servant remonstrated with the angel of the vision saying: ‘The land of Egypt is a domain of vast extent, and where shall thy servant go to find such persons among the many Israelites dwelling within its

borders.' The answer was: 'Thy steps shall be ordered, fear not!' I have never ceased from the quest. Answer me truly, art thou the persons?"

"Surely it must be that we are those, whom thou dost seek," replied Joseph, astonished. "This is Mary, my ward, and this child is her son."

"Shalt thou be inclined to visit the temple?" inquired the priest.

"Surely we will." It was Mary who answered, Joseph seeming to reflect.

"Then thou wilt follow me, for the Gods have a message for thee."

Forthwith, the magician went out of the tent, followed by Joseph, and Mary. When they were come unto a temple nigh the river Nile, the priest entered, and bade them follow fearlessly.

The huge pillars, supporting the massive structure were everywhere ornamented with beautiful carvings of symmetrical perfection.

Mary and Joseph observed the quaint and curious objects cut from the solid rock; the perpetual fires that burned on the altars; the priests ministering to strange gods and the attendants running to and fro with temple messages. They heard the tinkle of silver bells and the monotonous chant of the singers. Awe and reverence filled them, as these secret rites were exposed, and they followed the priest expectantly, until the door of an inner chamber closed, shutting out all the sounds of the temple, and enveloping them in complete darkness.

The priest guided them to a seat and bade them be at rest. The child had fallen asleep, but, in the uncertainty of their surroundings, Joseph did not relinquish his hold, keeping the tender body of the infant closely in his arms.

In the black silence a voice spoke to Mary, in her own tongue :

“Mary of Nazareth, daughter of Joachim, fear not. Thy sorrow hath come up before us. Be of good cheer. We are here to comfort thee, and strengthen thee for the work that is given thee to do. What thine ears shall hear and thine eyes behold, treasure up in thine heart against the time to come.”

A sudden beam, as though lightning had shot across the space, illuminated the obscurity.

Mary and Joseph had time to catch sight of a form, in the similitude of a man, whose hair was white and fell in silken waves upon his neck, whose body was clothed in linen, and whose loins were girded with fine gold. His face did shine, like unto the sun, and his eyes were as lamps of fire, while his arms and feet were, in color, like unto polished brass.

The apparition was seen, but for an instant, when the darkness again fell upon them and became blacker than before.

Joseph still clasped the child, but he dared not stand in the presence of the holy one, he had seen in the bright light. He prostrated himself on the floor. Yet, Mary was upheld by a strength, new to her, that seemed to permeate all her being.

Immediately she was conscious that the gloom was gradually disappearing. A halo of light came softly before her sight and then a brilliancy that rendered the most minute object visible.

She beheld the priest slowly arising from the floor. He beckoned her forward, and she unhesitatingly followed toward the spot where the beautiful vision had stood. From beyond, echoing among the vaulted recesses came a melodious voice, clear and tender :

"Mary, blessed among women, wife of Panthera, the beloved, thou art welcome. Thrice hast thou been blessed—in thy lineage, in thy marriage, and in the fruit of thy womb. Henceforth, take good courage, be strong—for in thy son, shall all the nations of the earth be crowned with glory, and honor, and peace. Return again to thine own land, for they that sought the life of the child are dead. When thy son shall have come to the age of twelve years, thou shalt deliver him to the Magi of India. They will instruct him in all the mysteries, and in the way of godliness, until he shall arrive at the time when he shall enter upon his mission and priesthood."

Mary gave heed to these words with understanding, and she looked with new joy into the face of her child because of what she had heard.

So it came to pass that, afterwards, Joseph and Mary returned to Galilee, where Joseph again worked diligently at his trade and did truly fulfill his vow, made unto the Lord—devoting all the rest of his life to the comfort and adoration of the child and his mother; while Mary kept all these revelations and pondered them in her heart.

THE END.

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